

**Arabic Travel Literature:
The Dilemma of Genre Classification**

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Abstract

This study examines the Arabic travel narrative through the lens of its generic identity and its relationship with broader forms of Arabic prose writing. It proceeds from the premise that travel is not merely a physical journey, but a discursive experience that intersects with various domains of knowledge including history, geography, anthropology, autobiography, the essay, and poetry.

The paper explores the challenge of literary classification, highlighting the difficulty of confining travel literature within rigid boundaries due to its hybrid, fluid, and multifaceted nature. It underscores the documentary and epistemological dimensions of Arabic travel literature, which extend beyond geographical description to encompass a rich interplay between observation, reflection, and cultural encounter.

Central to this discourse is the figure of the traveler–narrator, whose personal vision and interaction with the Other transform travel into an act of self-discovery and knowledge production. The study thus reveals the transformative and open-ended character of Arabic travel literature — a genre that resists stabilization and redefines itself as a “genre of genres.”

Ultimately, Arabic travel literature emerges as an interdisciplinary and dynamic field, inseparable from its historical and intellectual contexts. It represents an open literary form that harmonizes multiple discourses and artistic expressions, constructing a distinct yet ever-evolving literary identity.

Key words: Arabic travel literature; generic identity; literary classification; textual hybridity; cognitive interconnection.

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Introduction

Travel has historically functioned as a central mode through which humans relate to space, environment, and culture. In its earliest stages, it emerged as a practical response to basic existential demands, particularly those linked to survival and adaptation. Over time, however, this movement across territories evolved into a more deliberate and reflective activity, shaped by curiosity, the pursuit of knowledge, and the desire for cultural interaction. As a result, travel gradually transcended its utilitarian origins to acquire symbolic, intellectual, and aesthetic dimensions that extended beyond immediate necessity.

The accumulation of such experiences eventually took textual form, giving rise to what is now recognized as travel literature. This body of writing is marked by diversity in both function and expression. Certain texts emphasize observation and documentation, offering historical, geographical, and ethnographic insights, while others privilege individual perspective, narrative experimentation, and imaginative elaboration. Through this dual orientation, travel literature occupies an intermediate position between factual record and literary creation, enabling it to convey objective knowledge alongside subjective interpretation.

Within this broader context, Arabic travel literature holds a particularly significant place, distinguished by its continuity, variety, and cultural depth across different historical periods. It constitutes a rich cultural archive that records encounters with diverse regions, societies, and civilizations, while simultaneously reflecting the intellectual concerns and aesthetic sensibilities of its authors. Beyond its documentary significance, this literature expresses a persistent human drive toward exploration and discovery, transforming the journey into a narrative space for reflection, interpretation, and meaning-making.

The Arabic travel tradition thus emerges as a complex and multifaceted literary phenomenon, drawing upon a range of discursive domains such as history, geography, narrative prose, and myth. Although it intersects with other literary and non-literary forms, it retains its distinctiveness as a flexible and evolving genre capable of responding to shifting contexts and purposes. Its texts do not merely describe physical landscapes but also construct cultural meanings and engage with social practices, beliefs, and systems of value.

Given this complexity, the study of Arabic travel literature requires a critical approach that moves beyond rigid generic boundaries. Attention to its thematic concerns, narrative techniques, and modes of knowledge production enables a more nuanced understanding of its position within Arabic literary heritage and its broader contribution to intellectual and cultural discourse.

1. The Travel Text and Terminological Delimitation

The diversity of terms applied to the travel text constitutes a key indicator of its problematic classification within a fluid and evolving conceptual field. A fundamental distinction must be established between travel as a lived, material experience and travel as a narrative or stylistic construction. Travel, in its primary sense, refers to the act of movement undertaken by a traveler, whether the journey is personally recorded or later narrated by another figure, as in the case of Ibn Battuta's travels as written by Ibn Juzayy. This separation between the experiencing subject and the narrating voice reflects a broader epistemological divide between experience and representation.

The journey itself belongs to a historical subject shaped by perception, emotion, and circumstance, whereas the travel discourse emerges through a narrating consciousness that reshapes the experience according to specific communicative, aesthetic, and intellectual aims. A temporal and existential distance thus intervenes between the moment of travel and the act of narration, allowing the journey to be reconstituted, interpreted, and given meaning through discourse rather than simply reproduced.

Numerous journeys never entered the realm of textual production, while other travelers who documented their movements employed their observations and knowledge for purposes unrelated to travel writing as a distinct literary practice. The tendency to conflate the physical act of travel with its textual articulation, treating all travel accounts as homogeneous, has often obscured the specific literary, cultural, and cognitive dimensions that distinguish individual travel texts.

As a consequence, scholarly engagement with travel writing has frequently lacked a coherent critical framework capable of tracing the transformation of travel from an empirical act into a structured literary discourse. The diversity of travelers' social positions, motivations, and narrative strategies has contributed to the emergence of multiple, sometimes competing, terminologies intended to define the genre. Academic studies have generally converged around three principal designations: **rihla** as a broad umbrella term encompassing travel accounts in general; travel literature as a specifically literary category; and geographical literature as a descriptive or scientific mode of writing.

This terminological multiplicity has enabled scholars from different disciplines, including literary studies, geography, anthropology, and ethnography, to approach the travel text through their respective methodological lenses. As a result, travel literature remains a hybrid field that resists rigid classification and challenges conventional genre boundaries through its interdisciplinary character and complex textual identity.

Although a number of scholars have defended the designation travel literature for its breadth and adaptability, emphasizing its capacity to encompass the diverse profiles of travelers and authors, such inclusivity may come at the expense of analytical clarity. The diversity of the genre does not eliminate the need for precise critical frameworks; on the contrary, it demands a rigorous methodology capable of explaining how lived travel experience is reconfigured into a structured literary discourse.

At its core, travel literature functions as a descriptive mode of writing that represents space within a defined temporal context, thereby forging a close relationship between geography and literature. Temporality traditionally constitutes the foundation of historical narration, whereas spatial perception is central to geographical representation. This distinction may be likened to that between narration and direct observation, or between reported information and eyewitness experience. One articulates events through narrative sequencing, while the other conveys space through descriptive visualization.¹

On the basis of compositional features, scholars often distinguish between descriptive geography, geographical literature, and travel literature. Texts that adhere strictly to objectivity are classified as descriptive geography; those that combine factual information with stylistic

balance fall under geographical literature; and texts dominated by personal perspective and literary expression are identified as travel literature. Despite these categorizations, the boundaries, particularly between geographical literature and travel writing, remain fluid and contested. Nevertheless, all such texts can legitimately be situated within the broader sphere of literary production.

The prominence of literary elements within travel texts has been widely acknowledged in critical discourse. Observers have long noted that, despite their informational content, these works tend to align more closely with literature than with scientific geography. Arabic geographical writings, in particular, gradually evolved into texts characterized by narrative voice, reliance on direct observation, and the recounting of lived experience, thus approaching travel literature rather than geography in its modern disciplinary sense."² This evolution reveals a sustained interpenetration of literary and geographical discourse, with literary expression often taking precedence.

The absence of a unified critical approach to travel texts has led to divergent views regarding their generic classification. They have been variously interpreted as historical records, geographical treatises, autobiographical narratives, or works of narrative literature. Arguments in favor of their literary status emphasize the narrative vitality inherent in travel accounts, which challenges claims that Arabic literature lacks developed narrative forms. Such judgments, it is argued, overlook the rich storytelling techniques embedded in travel writings.

Ultimately, the literary significance of travel texts derives from the centrality of the journey itself, which structures the narrative and shapes its aesthetic form. Empirical reality is not merely recorded but artistically reworked, as experience is transformed into meaningful narrative material. This capacity for aesthetic transformation explains the sustained interest of linguists and literary scholars in travel literature, which intersects with genres such as the short story, the novel, and poetry. Through evocative description, dynamic imagery, and engagement with religious, political, and scientific contexts, travel writing articulates a subjective encounter with cultural and ideological difference, rendering the experience of the "Other" a core component of its literary value.

2. The Arabic Travel Narrative and Its Fluid Affiliations

The Arabic travel narrative resists fixed generic boundaries, as its structure emerges from the intersection of multiple disciplines and modes of knowledge production. It is characterized by a high degree of hybridity, combining historical and geographical description with ethnographic observation, anthropological insight, and reflective imagination. This interdiscursive nature highlights the genre's close relationship with both creative expression and intellectual exploration.

A defining feature of the Arabic travel narrative is the frequent reliance on first-person narration, where the roles of author, narrator, and traveler often converge. While this proximity brings the genre close to autobiographical writing, it does not fully align with it. Although chronological precision and detailed recording may recall memoirs or diaries, the organizing principle of the travel narrative remains the journey itself and the knowledge generated through movement and encounter. As an open and flexible form, it absorbs memories, impressions, and aesthetic expressions in both prose and poetry, often shaped by nostalgia, correspondence, or scholarly exchange. This openness positions the travel narrative as a liminal text that defies exclusive affiliation with any single literary category.³

Between the third and tenth centuries of the Hijri calendar, Arabic travel writing developed into a significant literary and cultural phenomenon, paralleling the expansion of travel across the Islamic world. Initially linked to historical and geographical documentation, it gradually incorporated pilgrimage accounts and exploratory journeys, reflecting the political and cultural expansion of the Islamic empire from the western Mediterranean to East Asia. Many journeys were undertaken for official purposes, including the collection of military,

economic, and intellectual information, which invested the traveler with a representative and strategic role. Despite this growth, the genre retained its fluid character, with its thematic focus and narrative form shaped by the traveler's objectives, perspectives, and expressive choices.

The popularity of these works was largely due to the practical and descriptive value of the information they conveyed, particularly in relation to geography and commerce. At the same time, they frequently included embellished or marvelous elements intended to captivate readers. The coexistence of empirical observation and imaginative elaboration became a defining trait of the genre. Even authors committed to accuracy often incorporated legendary material familiar to their audiences, resulting in narratives where the factual and the fantastical coexist without clear separation. Such representations of distant and wondrous places illustrate how imagination functioned alongside observation in the construction of travel knowledge.

Assessing the credibility of Arabic travel accounts therefore depends on the purpose and conditions of each journey. Descriptions grounded in direct observation of identifiable locations are generally more reliable, yet they still require critical scrutiny to distinguish empirical reporting from imaginative projection. These texts must also be read within their historical epistemological contexts, where scientific inquiry and mythical thinking were not perceived as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary modes of understanding the world.

Accordingly, Arabic travel literature is founded on a dual framework that combines a scientific orientation with a literary one. This duality helps mitigate the methodological difficulties associated with its classification and allows for a more coherent understanding of the diverse materials and narrative strategies that constitute this multifaceted genre.

3. Arabic Literary Travel Writing and Its Scholarly Significance

1. Historical value:

Arabic travel literature represents a significant epistemic corpus whose primary value lies in its historical function. Closely connected to historiography, these texts provide detailed representations of political, religious, intellectual, and social contexts as perceived through the traveler's direct engagement with both familiar and distant regions. Relying on observation, personal experience, and transmitted accounts, travel narratives sought to reconstruct events and realities, thereby filling historical gaps and preserving knowledge rooted in lived experience.

As a result, the Arabic travel narrative occupied a distinctive position within the broader literary tradition, contributing to the renewal of narrative forms and expanding the expressive possibilities of autobiographical and descriptive writing. It frequently intersected with biographical, historical, and anecdotal genres, reflecting its deep entanglement with both history and geography. Even when it asserted itself as an autonomous literary form, travel writing continued to draw upon historical sources, incorporating them as structural and discursive components.

Many Arabic travel accounts demonstrate this historical orientation by referencing earlier historians or by adopting a historiographical tone in recounting events and places. Consequently, history became an integral element of Arabic travel literature, shaping its narrative strategies and thematic concerns. Through this integration of historical documentation and literary imagination, travel writing conveyed a nuanced vision of cultural and civilizational diversity, articulated through the traveler's subjective yet informed perspective.

Travel narratives often display a relatively stable historical framework, as travelers tend to record the temporal span and contextual circumstances of their journeys. This attention to chronology introduces moments of narrative suspension that function as historical pauses, reinforcing the text's referential grounding and lending it a degree of documentary reliability. In this way, travel accounts fulfill an informative role while remaining embedded within a narrative structure. On the surface, this structure recounts events, observations, and impressions; at a deeper level, it operates as a mode of realistic legitimation, sustained by a

semiotic system in which reference remains plausible rather than strictly verifiable. Such a narrative logic is already evident in early Arabic travel texts, where factual description coexists with narrative construction.

The narrative discourse of travel writing is typically organized around a set of core elements, including reporting, chains of transmission, action, and reference. These components parallel those found in historical, linguistic, and literary forms of writing, which explains the particular value of travel literature for historians. Travel accounts often provide material that supports, supplements, or at times questions established historical narratives, making them useful sources for reconstructing specific periods and contexts.

However, the historical dimension of travel literature does not aspire to systematic historiography. Instead, it documents the traveler's successive stages, personal perceptions, and remembered accounts associated with time and experience. In this sense, the traveler assumes a dual position, combining observation with historical consciousness. The construction of historical reports within these narratives generally relies on two main sources: existing written histories and orally transmitted accounts of past events. Through this interplay, travel narratives contribute to the reactivation of past spaces, political figures, and significant events, not as detached historical records but as lived and narrated experiences.

An example appears in the travel account of Abū Dulaf:

Accounts of sacred and historical events frequently appear in Arabic travel narratives, where they are reformulated through the traveler's perspective rather than transmitted as detached chronicles. Such narratives recount encounters with rulers, religious figures, and symbolic objects in ways that combine historical memory with spiritual significance. These reports were later treated by scholars as credible points of reference, particularly by historians and geographers who relied on travel accounts as supplementary historical sources.

The authority attributed to these narratives is largely connected to their methodological grounding in transmission and eyewitness reporting. By invoking chains of narration, personal observation, and reported testimony, travel writers aligned their works with established principles of Islamic historiography. This concern for verification enhanced the perceived reliability of travel texts and reinforced their historical value, as evident in classical works where coherence between narrative structure and content supports the claim to factual accuracy.

Historical representation in Arabic travel literature is inherently hybrid. It draws simultaneously on geographical description, historical record, oral accounts, and visual observation, without adhering to a single, unified source of knowledge. References to history may appear as brief allusions to notable figures or communities, or as extended depictions of cities, landscapes, and monuments. These representations are never purely objective, as the traveler's subjectivity inevitably shapes the perception of events, places, and temporal sequences. Many travelers display psychological, cultural, and intellectual awareness that enables them to interpret societies and regions through a historical lens rather than merely record them.

Understanding the nature and significance of the travel narrative therefore requires attention to its dominant aims and narrative strategies. A clear distinction can be drawn between writers who seek to document reality with precision and those who employ travel writing as a space for imaginative reconstruction. Some travelers demonstrate a strong commitment to historical accuracy and documentary truth, while others privilege narrative freedom, organizing their accounts around evocative scenes, anecdotes, and marvels, even at the expense of strict chronological order.

In literary travel narratives, history becomes an act of interpretation shaped by aesthetic vision. Factual elements are interwoven with emotion, symbolism, and personal experience, allowing historical events to acquire broader cultural resonance. Through this process, the

journey is transformed from a mere record of movement into a meaningful narrative that reconfigures history as lived, perceived, and artistically reimagined experience.

2. The Geographical Value

Following the Islamic conquests, travel emerged as a primary vehicle for the production of geographical knowledge, often assuming greater significance than purely historical inquiry. Through direct observation and empirical description, Arab travelers recorded information on kingdoms, regions, climates, and urban centers, thereby contributing to the establishment of geography as a scientific discipline. Scholars such as al-Bīrūnī, al-Mas'ūdī, Ibn Khaldūn, al-Idrīsī, al-Maqdisī, and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa combined intellectual rigor with extensive travel, transforming exploration into a systematic and scholarly practice.

By the third century AH, a number of travelers were also distinguished linguists and philologists, including Hishām al-Kalbī, al-Jāhīz, and al-Sarakhsī. Their works—al-Aqālīm, Kitāb al-Amṣār wa 'Ajā'ib al-Buldān, and al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik—became foundational texts in what came to be known as the “science of lands.” Subsequent figures such as al-Munajjim, Ibn Khurradādhbih, al-Balādhurī, and Ibn Rusta further developed geographical knowledge through expeditions often supported by the state, signaling the institutional consolidation of Arab geography.

During the fourth century AH, geographical scholarship reached a stage of maturity, characterized by four major orientations: the cartographic representation of the Islamic world, regional specialization, the compilation of geographical lexicons, and encyclopedic synthesis. This period witnessed the production of some of the earliest historical maps, commonly referred to as the “Atlas of Islam,” by travelers such as al-Mas'ūdī and Ibn Faḍlān, whose journeys extended to northern regions inhabited by peoples such as the Rus and the Bulgars.

In the fifth century AH, scholars including Ibn Buṭlān and al-Bīrūnī further expanded the scope of geographical inquiry. Al-Bīrūnī's *Taḥqīq mā li-l-Hind* exemplifies an integrative approach that linked geography with religion, philosophy, and history. In al-Andalus, Maghrebi scholars such as al-'Udhri and al-Bakrī made significant contributions, with al-Bakrī's *Mu'jam mā Ista'jam* recognized as the first comprehensive geographical dictionary of Islamic lands. The sixth century AH sustained this intellectual trajectory, marked by methodological refinement and material innovation. The most prominent figure of this period was al-Sharīf al-Idrīsī, author of *Nuzhat al-Mushtāq*, who compiled extensive and scientifically grounded data from travel accounts. His work introduced major cartographic advances, including detailed maps of the known world and a silver globe representing the Earth's surface, produced for Roger II of Sicily.⁴

This tradition continued until the final significant journey of Ibn Khaldūn. From the eighth century AH onward, travel activity experienced a noticeable decline, coinciding with a wider period of cultural stagnation. Nevertheless, by that stage Arab travelers had already made substantial contributions to Arabic geographical knowledge through accurate and wide-ranging observations covering Asia, Africa, and Europe, in many cases exceeding the geographical understanding available in medieval Europe prior to the Age of Discovery.⁵

The gradual development of Arabic geographical thought from concise descriptive notes to more systematic and analytical treatments constituted a foundational element of the Arab geographical legacy. This progression generated an extensive body of knowledge that enabled scholars to investigate the inhabited world across eastern and western regions, thereby anchoring the advancement of geographical science within the framework of Islamic civilization.

Awareness of the relationship between travel and geography followed two principal paths: the scientific-analytical approach and the literary-aesthetic approach. Alongside these emerged a descriptive geographical orientation closely linked to the narrative nature of travel writing. Within travel literature, engagement with geography was largely descriptive, as

travelers recorded natural and human features from a perspective distinct from that of formal scientific geography. Whereas scientific works prioritized accuracy and objectivity, literary travel accounts relied on narrative techniques and evocative imagery.

In this way, travel literature became an important, if often unintended, source of geographical information, contributing to a broader understanding of both physical and human environments. As a result, geographers have drawn on a wide range of materials, including literary travel narratives that incorporate elements of myth and legend, recognizing their indirect yet meaningful contribution to geographical knowledge.

3. The Ethnographic Dimension

Ethnography occupies a central position within travel literature, with both domains maintaining a dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship. Arabic travel narratives, in particular, have functioned as extensive cultural repositories, documenting patterns of social life, customs, and traditions as perceived through the traveler's comparative perspective. By engaging with unfamiliar societies, travelers mediated access for Arab audiences to a wide spectrum of human experiences, thereby broadening awareness of diverse historical contexts and social formations.

Through attentive and often methodical observation of everyday practices such as rituals, foodways, and communal norms, travel writing gradually assumed an ethnographic function. This practice enabled travelers to engage directly with different communities and to record the structural features of their cultural systems. As a result, the Arabic travel corpus constitutes an invaluable source for understanding cross-regional human interaction, preserving distinctive social and civilizational characteristics of the societies encountered throughout the journey.

These ethnographic narratives frequently operate within a cohesive moral and religious framework that seeks to affirm credibility and ethical consistency, particularly in representations of "the Other." This tendency is clearly illustrated in al-'Abdarī's Moroccan travel account, where he denounces the abusive treatment inflicted upon pilgrims. His testimony highlights acts of obstruction, humiliation, and dispossession, which he presents as evidence of moral and religious failure. Drawing on personal observation, he describes how guards subjected pilgrims, both men and women, to searches, injustices, and degrading treatment, compelling them to swear oaths under duress. Such passages underscore the ethical dimension of ethnographic narration, where social description is inseparable from moral judgment⁶

The travel narratives of Ibn Battuta and Ibn Fadlan construct a social representation marked by strangeness and wonder, shaped through heightened sensory depiction and rhetorical intensification. By amplifying visual and experiential details, both travelers guide the reader beyond familiar realities into worlds perceived as astonishing and unfamiliar, where the act of description itself becomes a means of cultural mediation.

Among these accounts, Ibn Fadlan's journey to the northern regions, particularly his encounter with the Bulgars and the Volga basin, occupies a distinctive position within Arabic travel literature. His narrative is widely regarded as a unique and valuable source of ethnographic knowledge, notable for the richness and originality of its observations, as emphasized by several scholars. Rather than offering a purely itinerant report, Ibn Fadlan presents a detailed social portrait grounded in close observation of everyday practices and collective norms.

In his depiction of the Slavic communities, Ibn Fadlan provides a striking account of their social organization and customs. He records their methods of food storage, which lead to rapid spoilage, and their reliance on rancid fish oil for multiple purposes. Their diet is described as modest, centered on a barley-based broth largely consumed by servants and children. Social etiquette is also emphasized: head coverings are worn by all, yet removed as a sign of deference when the king passes alone through the market. While most of the population lives in tents, the ruler resides in an expansive, richly furnished pavilion capable of accommodating vast numbers

of people. Family and legal practices further distinguish this society, as child-rearing is entrusted to the grandfather and inheritance customarily passes to the deceased's brother rather than his son, a practice Ibn Fadlan claims to have sought to reform by instructing the ruler in alternative inheritance principles.

Ibn Fadlan's portrayal of the Rus merchants along the Itil River similarly combines physical description with cultural interpretation. He depicts them as exceptionally tall and physically imposing, fair in complexion, and marked by extensive tattoos that extend from the neck to the fingertips. Their attire, weapons, and prized possessions are described in detail, particularly their wide Frankish swords and highly valued green porcelain beads. He further emphasizes their excessive attachment to wine, portraying constant drinking as a defining feature of their social behavior, sometimes leading to death while still holding a cup.

Taken together, these travel narratives function not only as records of movement but also as interpretive frameworks through which cultural difference is observed and articulated. By documenting practices related to food, clothing, social hierarchy, belief systems, and daily conduct, travel writing offers a dense ethnographic archive that captures the diversity of human societies. In this sense, the travel account emerges as both a descriptive tool and a literary space in which cultural plurality and human experience are narrated and preserved.⁷

4. Arabic Travel Narratives and Their Literary Value

Arabic travel narratives are characterized by a marked thematic flexibility that permits the production of multiple layers of meaning, a feature closely connected to the narrative logic of the journey itself. This openness reflects a deliberate aesthetic orientation as well as narrative inventiveness, whereby storytelling becomes the mechanism through which events are generated and sustained beyond the mere description of movement in space. Such texts often occupy an intermediary position, articulating a particular vision or lived experience. A paradigmatic example is *The Voyages of Sinbad*, which operates simultaneously as a sequence of interconnected tales and as an expression of individual ambition related to exploration and commerce. In this sense, the journey functions at once as a narrative engine and as a projection of personal desire.

Travel discourse is fundamentally grounded in difference and direct experience, drawing its credibility from observation and factual engagement with reality, unlike purely fictional writing that reshapes the world through artistic invention. Nevertheless, confining travel writing to the realm of documentation alone overlooks its literary and aesthetic dimensions. A significant number of Arabic travel texts intertwine empirical description with imaginative elaboration, fusing physical movement with narrative purpose. Consequently, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes travel literature as a distinct literary genre governed by its own formal and stylistic conventions. This recognition becomes particularly valid when the text integrates imaginative and expressive elements according to a coherent narrative logic that differentiates representation from fabrication, without conflating the act of travel itself with its literary reconstruction. Failure to maintain this distinction has often led earlier researchers to treat travel merely as thematic material rather than as a discourse in its own right, resulting in analytical ambiguity within the travel text.

Within this critical framework, travel literature has been defined in various ways. One definition views it as a body of literary works through which authors convey their impressions of journeys across different regions, depicting social customs, behaviors, and moral values, offering detailed portrayals of natural landscapes, or recounting the stages of travel in a sequential manner, sometimes combining all these elements within a single text. Another perspective situates travel literature within prose writing that recounts real journeys undertaken by a notable traveler, striking a balance between subjective perception and objective description through adaptable form and content, with the explicit aim of engaging and influencing the reader. Both definitions emphasize the necessity of an actual journey as the foundation of the

text, while simultaneously acknowledging the imaginative dimension that qualifies travel writing as a literary art.

From this standpoint, travel literature emerges as an artistic practice that brings together the real and the possible through the active mediation of imagination, which constitutes an indispensable component of the genre. Imagination fulfills a dual function: it compensates for gaps in memory by creatively reconstructing experience, and it reshapes recollection either consciously, through self-idealization or the omission of personal details, or unconsciously, through the illusion of reliving past events. Through this interplay, Arabic travel narratives achieve their distinctive literary value, situated at the intersection of lived reality and creative expression.⁸

Travel narratives, therefore, emerge from the lived experience of an exceptional traveler whose journeys are shaped by deliberate purpose rather than chance. Across history, numerous figures, motivated by spiritual devotion, intellectual inquiry, or aesthetic sensibility, undertook arduous journeys in pursuit of exploration, knowledge, and the appreciation of human and natural diversity. Despite the difficulties they faced, these journeys were sustained by a deep-seated impulse and an enduring passion that rendered hardship secondary to the pleasure of discovery.⁹

This experiential dimension is clearly reflected in the writings of prominent Arab travelers such as Ibn Ḥawqal, al-Mas'ūdī, and al-Maḡdisī, whose accounts testify to the transformative nature of travel. Al-Maḡdisī, in particular, encapsulates the scope of his journeys through a self-reflective passage in which he emphasizes the breadth of regions he traversed, the social strata he encountered, and the varied circumstances he endured. His narrative highlights not only geographic mobility but also the multiplicity of identities ascribed to him, shaped by the lands he crossed and the experiences he accumulated. He presents himself as a traveler who shared in the trials of the road, encountered favor and adversity alike, and remained committed to his purpose despite political change, rivalry, and deception.

Equally significant is the emphasis placed on direct observation and personal engagement with places and events. By referencing visits to diverse locations, sites of religious and cultural significance, and communal festivities, the traveler asserts the credibility of his account and distances it from works produced through compilation or second-hand reporting. This insistence on firsthand experience establishes a clear distinction between a narrative forged through endurance and sacrifice and one assembled in comfort through reliance on transmitted information.

Moreover, the material and spiritual costs of such journeys further reinforce their authenticity. The considerable financial expenditures incurred, alongside the ethical and ritual concessions necessitated by constant movement, underscore the practical realities of travel. References to juridical dispensations adopted under duress illustrate how the physical demands of the journey shaped religious practice, thereby grounding the travel narrative in lived reality rather than abstract description.¹⁰

These passages foreground the effort and endurance invested by the author in the acquisition of geographical knowledge. Within this framework, the descriptive dimension of travel literature assumes a particular rigor that preserves narrative movement while shaping its thematic scope. Meaning precedes and directs form, whereas structural organization imposes a specific mode of narration. Content and form thus operate as interdependent components of the creative process, together producing the final aesthetic configuration of the travel text.

Nevertheless, it is the traveler's individual disposition, with its distinctive intellectual and imaginative capacities, that ultimately shapes both dimensions and gives rise to an original artistic articulation. This singular perspective opens access to a previously uncharted world, constructed through the author's creative awareness and imaginative reach. Each journey,

bound to a specific temporal, spatial, and experiential context, bears witness to the traveler's originality and creative autonomy.

Such individuality constitutes a defining feature of travel literature, endowing it with a lasting vitality that continually renews both its structure and its subject matter. The ongoing transformation of this creative singularity, inseparable from the traveler's evolving identity, renders rigid generic classification problematic. Historical approaches alone are insufficient to establish shared defining features, as these texts occupy a space of generic fluidity that resists fixed literary categorization. Even in early Arabic travel accounts, such as *The Voyage of al-Sīrāfī*, discourse remains inherently plural, constantly generating new expressive modes that mirror the authors' shifting sense of self and belonging.

The Arabic travel writer thus diverges from the historian and the geographer by integrating empirical observation with imaginative and stylistic elaboration. Early Arabic travel narratives clearly illustrate this hybrid nature, combining descriptive accuracy with literary artistry, as their authors assume the dual function of observer and narrator. This convergence results in considerable stylistic variation and thematic depth, transforming the travel account into a highly adaptable literary form.

Owing to this flexibility, Arabic travel writing came to function as a comprehensive expressive medium capable of accommodating multiple layers of meaning, uniting documentary precision with personal reflection and imaginative projection. Even the unpremeditated records of non-specialist travelers contributed to this synthesis of realism and aesthetic sensibility.

Gradually, the genre developed a strong affinity with narrative discourse, as the experience of travel naturally lends itself to storytelling. Through evocative prose, imaginative imagery, and reflective tone, travel writing acquired poetic and occasionally fictional dimensions that heightened its artistic appeal, offering readers both informational value and aesthetic enjoyment. The traveler remains the primary source of authenticity, simultaneously author and witness, recounting lived experiences through both reason and emotion. Adhering to narrative conventions such as introduction, progression, and closure, the travel account weaves subjective perception with objective description within a coherent communicative structure. This narrative coherence situates Arabic travel literature among the major narrative traditions.¹¹ Although it may not fully conform to the formal criteria of pure fiction, it retains its narrative vitality and aesthetic charm, ensuring its enduring position within Arabic literary production as a distinct genre: a narrative discourse centered on the experience of travel.

Travel literature is distinguished by its capacity to incorporate a wide range of expressive modes, both literary and non-literary, including letters, biographies, autobiographies, anecdotes, tales, diaries, poetry, and journalistic writing. These forms are not merely juxtaposed but are woven into the narrative structure itself, producing a distinctive mode of narration. This creative convergence generates a predominantly first-person discourse that foregrounds the self and the construction of identity in relation to the other, thereby reflecting the transformative perspective inherent in the experience of travel and movement.¹²

Such interweaving underscores the singularity of each travel text. Despite its affiliation with literature, travel discourse reveals a hybrid and heterogeneous character that allows it to move across multiple expressive and creative domains while engaging with diverse social, intellectual, cultural, and civilizational contexts. As a result, travel literature appears in varied forms and viewpoints, resisting stable definition and straightforward classification.

This diversity complicates attempts to situate the genre within a unified literary framework and prevents its submission to fixed narrative norms. Instead, travel writing foregrounds the author's individuality and personal outlook. For this reason, critics have repeatedly encountered difficulty in defining and categorizing the genre. It remains fluid and indeterminate, resisting rigid taxonomies and traditional literary hierarchies. Scholars such as

Roland Le Huenen attribute this indeterminacy to the genre's hybrid constitution, which obstructs the formulation of a stable poetics or aesthetic system. In a similar vein, Paul Hazard describes travel literature as a literary form with imprecise boundaries,¹³ a view echoed by Arab scholars such as Abdelrazzaq Mouafi, who argues that the freedom and continual transformation characteristic of these narratives have hindered agreement on a single structural model.

Any scholarly engagement with travel literature must therefore recognize an inherent methodological instability, the denial of which leads to a distorted understanding of the genre. Accordingly, classifying travel texts solely on the basis of thematic content or fluctuating rhetorical strategies within established narrative forms proves inadequate. Their formal organization is shaped by specific determinants, including the nature and length of the journey, the traveler's identity and perspective, their cultural background, and the particular scenes or phenomena that guide their narrative focus.

Within this framework, *Tartīb al-Rihla* by the Andalusian jurist and scholar Abū Bakr al-'Arabī occupies a seminal position in the formation of Arabic travel literature, as it fulfills the genre's artistic and aesthetic criteria. The text provides extensive cultural and social observations drawn from the regions he traversed and stands as an early model that predates, and in several respects informs, the work of Ibn Jubayr, who later consolidated the defining characteristics of the travel narrative as an independent literary form.¹⁴

Among the most prominent works of this tradition is the well-known account of Ibn Faḍlān, composed in the context of an official diplomatic mission and distinguished by its thematic richness, cultural diversity, and multifaceted perspectives. Likewise, 'Amārah ibn Ḥamzah's journey to the Byzantine emperor moves beyond straightforward description, offering vivid narrative scenes, sharp observations, and elements of satire directed at imperial authority. His attention to marvels and curiosities, coupled with a persistent effort to interpret and explain them, reflects a pronounced intellectual curiosity and desire for knowledge.¹⁵ In some instances, official journeys of this kind, including those undertaken by order of the Caliph al-Wāthiq bi-llāh, reveal underlying motivations that are not always readily explicable through purely rational frameworks.

Arabic travel writing thus manifests considerable diversity as a dynamic and dialogic literary practice. Its compositional structure resists restriction to a single domain, whether geographical, historical, ethnographic, or fictional. This very resistance, however, affirms its status as an autonomous genre characterized by specific formal and thematic features.¹⁶ The interaction of multiple fields of knowledge within the narrative, each present to varying degrees, contributes to a distinctive aesthetic and epistemological profile that cannot be reduced to any one discipline.

Within this context, the travel narrative incorporates the author's subjective outlook and emotional responses, recording what provoked admiration, discomfort, or conflict with personal convictions. The narrator's selective gaze inevitably introduces subjectivity, foregrounding certain experiences while silencing others considered troubling, inappropriate, or incompatible with religious or ideological commitments. As a result, despite its grounding in lived experience, travel literature acquires a pronounced personal dimension that shapes both its narrative voice and its interpretive framework.¹⁷

Arabic travel literature engages the traveler's perceptual and intellectual faculties, integrating geographical, historical, and social awareness into a coherent interpretive vision. Travelers direct their attention to landscapes, temporal contexts, or societal practices, synthesizing observations according to a creative logic that transforms experience into expressive insight. This approach moves beyond simple documentation, producing a selective and imaginative narrative. Over time, such texts evolved from fragmented accounts of lived or dreamlike experiences into structured literary compositions capable of articulating a human-

centered understanding of the world, in which encounters with the Other serve as a vehicle for self-reflection and learning.¹⁸

As a medium for representing foreign societies, travel literature occupies a significant position within imagology, a field, as defined by Said Allouch, that examines the ways nations construct images of one another, including the rhetorical and cultural implications of these depictions. Imagology bridges the documentation of customs and traditions with the analysis of cultural frameworks, revealing how the traveler's discourse is shaped by both observed and inherited social structures. Consequently, travel writing extends beyond geographic description to reflect the worldview and cultural logic of the originating society, which in turn informs the author's stylistic and rhetorical choices.

The travel narrative embodies multiple overlapping identities—the traveler, the author, the narrator, and the Other—operating along two interconnected trajectories: one that observes and interprets the external environment, and another that subtly mirrors the traveler's own society. Through these intertwined perspectives, the text negotiates the interplay between self and Other, the familiar and the foreign, as well as openness and restraint, thereby exploring questions of identity and alterity.

Readers' engagement with travel literature reflects this multidimensionality. By portraying diverse human experiences, lifestyles, and social practices across space and time, the genre functions as a lens onto the traveler's intellect, self-awareness, and cultural context. This characteristic is particularly evident in modern Arab travel writing from the eighteenth century onward, where encounters with Western societies were examined under specific historical and cultural circumstances.

It is widely recognized that such literary constructions of nations exert considerable influence on intercultural relations, shaping political perspectives, intellectual attitudes, and public opinion. Comparative literary approaches are therefore essential for uncovering these dynamics, allowing societies to critically reassess their representations of others and cultivate more nuanced understanding.¹⁹

Travel literature can be understood as a text that operates at multiple intersections, an open form in which historical, geographical, and imaginative consciousness converge within the realms of self, otherness, and civilization, revealing societal values and their transformations. Its complexity requires a nuanced methodological approach and an interpretive reading that acknowledges its distinctive features. Traditional criticism has often overlooked the unique status of travel narratives, relegating them to historical, geographical, or ethnographic study rather than recognizing them as autonomous literary works capable of interdisciplinary engagement. The ambiguous position of these texts—both in terms of genre and their dialogue with other forms—calls for a thorough examination of their evolving configurations.²⁰

From this perspective, the travel narrative emerges as a versatile form open to multiple affiliations. Originating as an expressive mode shaped by cultural and civilizational imperatives, it has established a distinct yet interactive role within the Arabic narrative tradition. This autonomy allows travel literature to engage with other literary forms, offering a multifaceted vision of reality and imagination. The text navigates the space between actuality and invention, producing a secondary reality with its own narrative logic and structure.²¹

Characterized by hybridity, multiplicity, and fluidity, travel literature surpasses conventional literary boundaries. By incorporating various forms and discourses, it functions as an inclusive, flexible genre, often blending documentary, descriptive, and aesthetic registers. Unlike strictly bounded literary genres, the travel narrative resists categorization; its unity derives from the diversity of its forms, purposes, and stylistic transitions rather than generic purity. Its discourse moves dynamically across experiences, challenging literary norms and the

reader's expectations through engagement with human experience, which continually reshapes its meanings and structures.²²

Despite this fluidity, travel literature exhibits a fragmented identity, forming a mosaic of tones that oscillates between convergence and divergence, often intersecting with or paralleling other modes such as autobiography, didactic poetry, and journalistic essays. Its adaptability spans literary and non-literary registers, earning it the description of a "migratory text" or "literature without borders." Coherence in these works arises from the interplay of historical, social, theological, and literary elements, frequently interwoven with myth, folklore, Sufi narratives, and heroic motifs.²³ Spatial and narrative boundaries are established, yet figures and stories frequently cross these limits, reflecting the traveler's creative capacity to transcend the unfamiliar and reimagine new worlds.

Conclusion

Travel literature must be examined through its multiple dimensions, its cognitive frameworks, and the ways in which various forms intersect, ultimately converging at the point where knowledge and literary expression meet. Attempts to impose rigid definitions or fixed parameters on this genre prove ineffective, given its inherently fluid and dynamic character. The most productive analysis situates the travel text within its particular context, where overlapping genres and forms produce a distinctive rhetoric characterized by hybridity and intertextual engagement.

Arabic travel literature has long offered rich documentary material, serving as a significant resource across numerous scholarly fields. Yet, scholarly attention should not be limited to this documentary aspect alone, for such a focus risks overlooking the unique literary discourse that emerges from the genre itself. This discourse manifests its vitality through

narrative structures that generate meaningful, dynamic signs along the course of the journey, conveying substantial aesthetic and intellectual value.

Neglecting this dimension is therefore unwarranted. A central task for Arabic literary criticism is to explore and highlight the depth of this discourse, which embodies complex representations of social, cultural, and civilizational realities. Its enduring significance lies in its regenerative capacity, harnessing the reflective self and imaginative faculties to articulate subjectivity, negotiate identity, and engage with the Other, ultimately revealing the ethical and cultural values embedded in encounters with alterity.

Footnotes:

- 1 See: Saeed Yaqtin, "Arabic Narrative: Concepts and Manifestations," op. cit., p. 173.
- 2 See: Shawqi Dayf, *Travels*, Dar al-Maaref, Cairo, Egypt, 4th ed., 1976, p. 12.
- 3 See: Saeed Jabbar, *From Narrative to Imaginary, A Study of Some Semantic Patterns in Arabic Narrative*, Dar Al-Aman, Rabat, Morocco, 1st ed., 2009, p. 296.
- 4 See: Fouad Qandil, *Travel Literature in the Arab Heritage*, op. cit., pp. 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81.
- 5 See: Hosni Mahmoud, *Travel Literature Among the Arabs*, op. cit., p. 8.
- 6 See: Muhammad al-Abdari, *al-Abdari's Journey*, op. cit., p. 216.
- 7 See: Ibid, pp. 150, 151, 156.
- 8 See: Nadia Mahmoud Abdullah, *The Journey Between Reality and Fantasy in the Literature of André Gide*, op. cit., p. 120.
- 9 See: Hussein Fawzi, *The Tale of the Ancient Sinbad*, Press of the Committee for Authorship, Translation, and Publication, Cairo, Egypt, 1st ed., 1943, p. 260
- 10 See: Al-Maqdisi, *The Good Divisions in the Knowledge of the Regions*, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Ilmiyyah, Beirut, Lebanon, 2nd ed., 2002, pp. 41-42.
- 11 See: Abdel Rahim Mouden, *Travel Literature*, Dar Al Thaqafa for Publishing and Distribution, Casablanca, 1st ed., 1996, p. 30.
- 12 See: Shaib Halifi, *Travel in Arabic Literature*, op. cit., p. 8.
- 13 See: Abdel Nabi Zaker, *The Real and the Imaginary in the European Journey to Morocco*, Publications of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Agadir, Al-Kawthar Publications Press, Casablanca, Morocco, 1st ed., 1997, p. 8.
- 14 See: Fouad Qandil, *Travel Literature in the Arab Heritage*, op. cit., p. 75.
- 15 See: Nasser Abdul Razzaq Al-Mawafi, *Travel in Arabic Literature until the End of the Fourth Century AH*, op. cit., p. 212.
- 16 See: Salah al-Din Ali al-Shami, *The Journey: The Eye of Insightful Geography*, op. cit., p. 149.
- 17 See: Shu'ayb Halifi, *The Journey in Arabic Literature*, op. cit., p. 39.
- 18 See: Ibid., p. 69.
- 19 See: Muhammad Ghanimi Hilal, *Comparative Literature*, Nahdet Misr Printing and Publishing, Cairo, Egypt, 8th ed., 2008, p. 338.
- 20 See: Abd al-Rahman Mu'addin, *The Moroccan Journey in the Nineteenth Century: Levels of Narrative*, Al-Suwaiti Publishing and Distribution House, UAE; Al-Ahliya Publishing and Distribution House, Amman, Jordan, 1st ed., 2006, p. 23
- 21 See: Ibid., p. 41.
- 22 See: Midani Ben Omar, "Travel Literature: Between Conceptual Ambiguity and the Difficulty of Classification," as part of the proceedings of the National Symposium: *The Journey in Algerian Literature, the Image of Reality and the Aesthetics of the Imagination*, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts and Languages, University of Martyr Hamou Lakhdar, El Oued, November 19-20, Archives of the University Website before August 2022, p. 2.
- 23 See: Abdul Nabi Dhaker, *The Arab Journey to Europe, America, and Russia during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (A Study of the Possible)*, Al Suwaiti Publishing and Distribution House, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 2005, p. 94.