

A Comparative Study of *The Days* by Taha Hussein and *Aké: The Years of Childhood* by Wole Soyinka

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Abstract

Comparative literature is a field of study that fosters the convergence of ideas, knowledge and cultural perspectives. This type of study has received significant attention from scholars of Arabic and English in the modern era. However, comparisons between Arabic and English literary works remain scarce in Arabic literary studies in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper focused on deducing and studying the differences between the books *The Days* by Taha Hussein and *Aké: The Years of Childhood* by Wole Soyinka. Its objectives include comparing and contrasting the contents of the two literary works, analysing the artistic and narrative aspects of the two books, and clarifying some aspects of childhood behaviour despite their different regional backgrounds, ideologies, and religions. This study employs two primary mythologies: historical and analytical. The historical approach provides a brief overview of the two writers' lives throughout the study. The analytical approach is a study of the two writers' autobiographies, which were analysed according to literary and artistic standards. In conclusion, this research showed that the two biographies reflect the childhoods of the two writers, despite differences in environment and culture, and both works conform to the artistic standards and linguistic rules established in their respective languages, despite their differences in

writing style. The study recommended that Wole Soyinka's works be translated into Arabic and Taha Hussein's works into English, and it urges researchers to focus on their interest in childhood experiences in the works of African writers, despite the differences in their environments and cultures, to derive benefits and information from the convergence of ideas and knowledge.

Keywords: Comparative literary analysis, cross-cultural childhood, autobiographical literature, Taha Hussein, Wole Soyinka, childhood experiences

1. Introduction

This study focuses on two major literary works: *The Days* by Taha Hussein 1889-1973 and *Aké: The Years of Childhood* by Wole Soyinka, which gained a great deal of fame for the two writers and reached the heights of glory as both of them gained fame that no other writer in their time had. Taha Hussein was called the Dean of Arabic Literature, and Wole Soyinka won the Nobel Prize in English Literature while still alive. Both works are autobiographical narratives that describe Taha Hussein's childhood experiences in the Arabic village of Al-Kilo, near Magadha, a city in Minya Governorate, Upper Egypt. It is a book composed of three parts, from which its author took over thirty out of a hundred to narrate his childhood days regarding belief, learning, education, and upbringing in classical Arabic. *Aké: The Years of Childhood* is an autobiographical work by Wole Soyinka depicting his childhood experiences in Aké, Nigeria, from 1934 to 1945. It differs from its counterpart, *The Days*, in that, in its pages, it tells the story of its author's childhood and discusses his environment and Yoruba culture in English. These two stories or autobiographies recount the writers' lives from birth to an advanced stage.

Given that both works narrate the lives of their respective authors, they fall within the genre of autobiography, which explores personal identity through their experiences, reveals the character during the process of conflict that takes place between the writer's sense of himself, society's position towards him, and the extent of one party's submission to the other. (Abduh 11) The two writers' childhood phenomenon was researched in this regard. Hence, the research focuses on the first part of the book *The Days*, which talks about Taha Hussein's early childhood, his travel to Cairo and his enrollment in Al-Azhar Al-Sharif, then the book *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, which also talks about the childhood

years of Wole Soyinka and his early life in primary school. It is worth mentioning here that Soyinka wrote four books in his autobiography: *Aké: The Years of Childhood* 1988, *Ìsara: A Voyage Around "Essay"* 1989, *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years* 1993, and *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* 2006. This article will look at the differences between the two works above. Both Soyinka and Hussein are considered pioneers in autobiography in its contemporary form, as this genre of literature has gained great fame among Arabs and the West. Although the memoirs of Soyinka and Hussein are of the same literary genre,

However, the differences between them go beyond the common factors, not only because the first reveals a Western mentality and the other an Eastern one, but also because of other factors, including physical makeup, psychological factors, and narrative art in each. Whoever reads Wole Soyinka's biography finds that the writer imagines the outcome of the change and states it without explaining the events of his life. He is like someone who tells you, "This is how things happened." Wole Soyinka passively absorbs his surroundings, observing, listening, reading, and engaging with people, allowing his life experiences to shape him rather than being driven by strong personal motivations. As for Taha, he clashes with people, worries, gets upset, and has evil thoughts about them. He feels that all external annoyances are stored in his memory, so he avoids them and is motivated to confront them when the opportunity arises. Wole Soyinka's report states the truth, while Taha Hussein portrays it as he felt it one day. While *The Days* explores its author's psychological evolution, *Aké: The Years of Childhood* focuses more on external relationships and interactions within Soyinka's environment. While you can build from each of *The Days* a picture of the character of its author, you find that Wole Soyinka describes his image, nature, village, and environment. This analysis highlights key differences between the two autobiographies, starting with the significance of their title:

2. Title

The first of these differences appears in the title. Taha Hussein, credited with the emergence of autobiography in Arabic, spoke about himself from birth to the writing of his book. Still, the Eastern tendency to avoid revealing the self explicitly led him to choose a title for his autobiography, *The Days*, with no clear meaning. He also spoke about himself in the third person without specifying the time, place, and characters

precisely, which we will discuss in detail later. As for the phrase *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, which Wole Soyinka chose as the title for his book, it reflects a European tribal concept, meaning that he is telling his story and the events that surrounded him in his childhood between 1934 and 1945 in the city of Aké, Abeccota. It differs from its counterpart, *The Days*, in that it tells an honest story about the life of its author and in that it is about the environment and European culture of its author. He asserts that Wole Soyinka was determined to introduce himself to the reader without ambiguity or vagueness and to reveal everything about himself, including his shortcomings, even if it surprised the reader or caused a scandal.

3. Declaration and Generalisation

The two writers' most essential and substantial difference lies in their use of declarative and generalising statements. Taha Hussein intentionally employed broad generalisations utilising third-person pronouns while omitting specific references to time and place. He did not specify or identify the characters he spoke about by particular names. He called these characters our master, our friend, and the boy, etc. "He does not mention a name for this day, nor can he place it where God placed it in the month and year. Rather, he cannot mention a specific time for this day but rather approximates it." "I think this time was at dawn or dinner!" (Hussein 1) Soyinka's narratives are characterised by precise, explicit language, incorporating first-person pronouns, meticulously specifying time and place, and drawing illustrations of the characters he meets. This is what he said in his biography: "I was lying on the green in front of our house, looking with my face to the sky and my head towards the bishops' courtyard while my feet were towards the inner fence of the priest's house, and I could see from those low spaces half of the English Girls' School and the other half of the bishops' courtyard.... Whenever I passed by the bishops' house on a mission to my great aunt Miss Legade, I knew it was nothing more than a house for the school girls and an additional playground for us during the holidays." (Soyinka 4)

4. The Physical Factor

The reasons for the difference in physical condition mentioned earlier are related to Taha Hussein's fundamental factor. Taha Hussein lost his sight in his second year of

life, leading to a different type of literary narration than Wole Soyinka used. Taha Hussein's works are considered sayings or dictations, not writings. A fundamental distinction exists between written and spoken discourse as well as between the roles of writer and speaker. The speaker always evokes himself more than the writer, as the speaker's discourse only exists in the presence of a listener. This presence imposes pressure on the speaker, which means that the speaker's "ego" is constantly anxious towards the listener or is considered his.(Ismail 11- 12) In addition, saying for Taha Hussein is regarded as a biological or vital necessity and not an ontological necessity or a being specific to the science of beings, and this is what Taha Hussein himself stated when he said that the saying is eliminated when he speaks or when dictated and confirmed it in his introduction to *The Days*, which he wrote in 1954: "This is a conversation that I dictated during some free time. I dictated it to get rid of some heavy worries and sad thoughts by dictating it."(Hussein 3)

Taha Hussein's narrative style reflects influences from ancient Arabic poetry, particularly pre-Islamic poets. Izz al-Din Ismail was a distinguished Egyptian literary critic and scholar, known for his contributions to Arabic literary criticism and his deep engagement with classical and modern Arabic literature. Izz al-Din Ismail noted in his article "I am the Speaker Taha Hussein" (Ismail 15) that when pre-Islamic poets use the third-person pronoun, especially when they talk about my friend or our friend, they mean an implicit speech that they address to themselves. Taha Hussein employs third-person pronouns to narrate his experiences, presenting his identity as a collective societal case, thereby reinforcing his objectivity and credibility.

5. The Problem of Name Identity

In *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, Wole Soyinka adhered to the rules of autobiographical narration. His book was distinguished by the identical names of the novel's three elements: the author, the narrator, and the hero, the main character. The author, narrator, and main character were unified; they express one character, Wole Soyinka. Also, his use of the first-person pronoun from the beginning to the end confirms the concept of the unification of the three elements that make up the story. This is a covenant that the writer concluded with the reader. An autobiographical writer must

provide precise details about personal history, including birthdate, location, parental background, and an extensive account of the extended family. These accurate details that the writer gives to the reader are to remove any doubt about his credibility and to remove any ambiguity or confusion regarding any basic or secondary topic in the life of the narrator and the author.

If clarity and detail characterise Wole Soyinka's autobiography, then ambiguity and confusion are essential features of Taha Hussein's autobiography. We have previously explained that he did not specify the time or place for the most important events, and could not determine the events between dawn and evening. Thus, he says, "And his greatest suspicion is that this time of that day was at dawn or evening!"

6. Language

Language is a structured system of signs and symbols that serves as a fundamental tool for knowledge acquisition. Language is the most important means of understanding and interaction between members of society in all areas of life. Language facilitates human cognitive processes, enabling complex thought and knowledge. Language is closely related to thinking; human thoughts are always formulated in a linguistic mould, even in subconscious thinking. Only through language does the idea obtain its real existence. Language also symbolises the things it reflects, as it can acquire and use a complex system of communication, especially the ability of humans to do so. Language is one of the specific examples of this system, and the scientific study of language is called linguistics; language is a customary organisation to symbolise the activity of society, and this organisation includes several systems, each of which consists of a group of meanings opposite which stands a group of organisational units or buildings expressing these meanings. (Hassan 3)

A key distinction between the two autobiographies lies in their linguistic medium: *The Days*, written in Arabic, and *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, in English, reflecting their distinct cultural and environmental influences. This is due to the differences in their languages, environments, and cultures.

7. Style

The disability that Taha Hussein suffered from in childhood, which caused him to lose his sight, must have had an impact on his thinking and his way of life. Thus, the French writer Buffon 1707-1788 tells us: "Style is man", meaning that a person's style in his expressions, thinking, or appearance reflects the person's personality. Plato says that qualities resemble style. Likewise, Sénèque, a Roman writer and philosopher, says: "Discourse reveals the characteristics of the soul." André Gide recorded this impression in the introduction to his translation of *The Days*, where he said: "It is the work of a blind man, and the author does not let us forget this situation on every occasion during his narration. He depicts the first steps of childhood with great precision, and he is very careful to show this poverty on his face, which often makes the face of the capable dark." (Guiraud 24-28)

Soyinka describes the characters and events with his expressive power, including his description of the bishops' house: "The bishops' house was more beautiful and splendid than the priest's house... Clean white stones and beautiful flowers surrounded it, the shady rocks were spread everywhere, and the clouds added to its charm and splendour. When strong storms blew, the leaves of the trees would come and go with the wind until they hung over the bishops' house." (Soyinka, 1988, p. 5) Then Soyinka described another house with a splendid entrance and white columns, and the gate was guarded by a policeman wearing loose shorts, and a white man might live in it. It had cannons used in wars. The writer asked his mother why his father called Badilima the cannon, and the mother explained, but he knew his answer: "The head Badilima is like a cannonball in shape. That is why the father called it the cannon." (Soyinka 12)

This suggests that Soyinka presents reality with unfiltered honesty, emphasising a direct and vivid portrayal of events. Because he sees that, while Taha Hussein tries to hide his disability, he gives the impression of seeing when he describes characters and events. For instance, Hussein's detailed depiction of Our Master creates the illusion of sight, despite his blindness: "And the sight of our master was amazing on his way to the school and to the house in the morning and evening, he was huge and fat, and his rudder increased his bulk, and as we mentioned, he spread his arms on the shoulders of

his two companions." (Hussein 32) However, he did not completely hide this disability. He was only trying to minimise its effect, so he says later when our master held the boy's hand: "And he took the boy's hand, and the boy was only startled by something strange in his hand, he had never felt anything like it, wide and trembling, full of hair in which the fingers could sink, because our master had placed the boy's hand on his beard." (Hussein 46)

Hussein's reliance on tactile descriptions highlights his loss of sight, later complemented by auditory and olfactory imagery to construct a vivid sensory landscape. He describes his world: "For days, he would hear this sound if he returned from Al-Azhar in the morning and returned from it in the evening. He would hear it, deny it, and be too embarrassed to ask about it. Then he understood from some of the conversations that it was the gurgling of a hookah smoked by some of the neighbourhood merchants and prepared by the owner of the coffee shop from which that light heat and thin smoke emanated." (Hussein 3)

In conclusion, the above shows that ambiguity and lack of clarity are two fundamental pillars of Taha Hussein's technique and style. They reveal his Cartesian approach and an authentic trait of the writer's personality, which sometimes reaches the point of being described as sadistic or torturous. He wants the reader to experience the same difficulty he faces and the same pain he suffers. In addition, Taha Hussein clarified his methodology and writing style, which are based on his desire to invite the reader to participate in weaving the events of his novel. He refuses to give the reader everything he has without the reader exerting an effort similar to that exerted by the writer. In this regard, we refer the reader to the second chapter of his short story *Beyond the River*, from which we quote the following: "According to Hussein, literary function is a dynamic partnership between writer and reader where meaning is co-constructed rather than passively consumed. This story does not tolerate a negative reading, but rather, it is intended. It is only based on positive participation between the writer when he draws the lines and the reader when the drawing is completed. He fills in the space between the lines that was perhaps left intentionally and deliberately." (Hussein 28-29)

Hussein elaborates on his dialectical approach, rejecting traditional literary consumption in favour of an interactive relationship with the reader: "Our writers have accustomed readers to preparing literature for them as food is prepared for them. Readers have nothing to do but read and digest it. As for me, I would not say I like this type of literary cooking because I am great in myself, and I hate that it is a servant to readers on the one hand, and I am great in readers and I hate that their ears are mouths and their minds are bellies into which words are thrown, so they hear and then digest. I do not like any of this, but I like to create a kind of fellowship between the readers and me so that we begin the story together, continue in it together, and finish it together. We sometimes agree and sometimes disagree, and quarrels arise between us occasionally."

(Hussein 29)

In the seventh chapter of his short story, he confirms his previous approach: "The entire hill, with everything on it and everyone on it, and the entire palace, with everything in it and everyone in it, are a secret of mine. I permit the readers to do whatever I want of them. They have no right to dispute that or deny anything of it. I have decided not to ascend with them to the palace, nor to remain with them on the hill, in response to a principle of art as I see it, not as the critics see it." (Hussein 60)

8. Separation from Society

Jean-Paul Sartre asserts that accumulated past experiences shape human identity. However, Hussein deliberately distances himself from his past through third-person narration. As for Taha Hussein, he tried to separate himself from his past by using the third-person pronoun. His use of the third person allows him to deny himself and separate himself from the events of his past. It also reveals his monopoly on his past and his denial when he proudly speaks about it. (Abdul Daim 414) This is what we notice during the narration of his novel, and this appears in the last chapter of the first part of *The Days* when he addresses his daughter: "Do not you see that your father is the best and most generous of men? Do not you see that he was also the best and most noble of children?" (Hussein 145) Hussein's narrative separation – reflecting his rejection of society, his uncertainty about past events, or both – is conveyed through two techniques: the novel's initial negative construction and the repeated use of negation

throughout the story. His work: "He does not mention a name for this day, nor can he place it where God placed it in the month and year. Rather, he cannot mention a specific time for this day but approximates it approximately." (Hussein 3)

When Taha Hussein first uses the term in his biography, he does not name this day, and he cannot place it where God placed it; he violates the first truth in the autobiography, unlike Wole Soyinka. However, this shows Taha Hussein's determination to present his biography in a Cartesian style that confirms his objectivity, as seen in his move from specialisation to generalisation.

Hussein further reinforces his detachment from society and denial of his past through the passive voice, absolving himself of direct responsibility for past events, as is clear in his saying: "Our friend never forgot that he sat in his place on the train when it reached Rome at midnight, and he did not leave that place next to the window until the train reached Paris after a full thirty hours. He did not move; rather, he was more like a bag thrown in that place." (Hussein 68)

The schism between Hussein and his society, evident in his use of third-person narration, negation, and passive voice, creates a narrative duality that permeates his autobiographical work. In an autobiography, it is assumed that we are faced with one character in which the characters of the author, the narrator, and the subject of the biography are identical. Still, in Taha Hussein's autobiography, this identity is separated, and this separation continues throughout the novel.

9. Culture

Wole Soyinka's roots are in European culture, but his experiences extend beyond it. His formal education and practical experience have connected him to the ideas of the modern world. Soyinka was born into Yoruba culture and has become a natural part of it. Moreover, he has shown a keen interest in studying his people's culture. His keen interest is evident in the vocabulary and language nuances he uses with striking effect in his fascinating autobiography, which illustrates his point. In describing the bookseller's daughter, he says: "She had one daughter called Buku (al) who was not of this world as it seemed to the writer. She was bound to the ground with charms, riddles, and anklets, which she wore on her knees, fingers, and waist because she was Abiku. The word

Abiku is of European origin and means a child who is born, then dies, then is born again, then dies, and so on, according to the beliefs of the people of this region. Soyinka incorporated numerous Yoruba terms such as Igunun, Aur, and Igabobo, alongside European linguistic influences, reflecting the hybrid nature of his cultural background.

As for Taha Hussein, his cultural roots lie in Arab culture. He called for an Arabic literary renaissance and worked to write in a simple, straightforward style while preserving the language's vocabulary and grammar. His opinions provoked many people, and he was accused of many things. Taha did not care about this revolution or the strong opposition he faced, but continued his call for renewal and modernisation. He presented many opinions that were characterised by extreme boldness and frankness. He drew on those around him and his predecessors, thinkers and writers, their traditional methods of teaching Arabic literature, and the weakness of teaching standards in government schools, the judiciary school, and others. He also emphasised the importance of clarifying Arabic literary texts for students, preparing Arabic language and literature teachers to be highly capable and cultured, and adopting an innovative approach rather than adhering to traditional teaching methods.

10. Religion and Faith

The two writers differed in religion and belief regarding their books. Taha Hussein, raised in a devout Muslim household, emphasised monotheism and reverence for the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in his writings. This is evident in what Taha Hussein said about his father: "Our friend used to sleep in a room next to this sheikh's room, so he would listen to him recite until he memorised many of these supplications and prayers. The village people loved Sufism and performed supplications, and our friend loved that from them because he was entertained by this supplication and by what the singers chanted during it. By the age of nine, Hussein had already internalised a rich repertoire of songs, historical narratives, and poetry from the Himalayan and Zenatiyyin traditions alongside supplications, Sufi chants, and a complete memorisation of the Qur'an." (Hussein 68)

As for Wole Soyinka, he is neither Christian nor pagan because he grew up in an environment mixed with Christianity, Islam and paganism and was influenced by these

religions in his writing, as he said: "It was St. Peter's Church, where they performed morning and evening prayers in English, and organ music was resounding on those evenings." (Soyinka 16)

11. Conclusion

This comparative analysis highlights the key differences in narrative techniques between Taha Hussein's *The Days* and Wole Soyinka's *Aké: The Years of Childhood*. It noted that Wole Soyinka presented a model of autobiography in its traditional form, noting that he promised the reader clear statements in all his stories, and when he fulfilled his promise, he united the three elements that make up the novel author, narrator, and main character, and mentioned all the details with great precision, so the events of the biography were described, in the beginning, with credibility factual.

Hussein's autobiographical approach employs deliberate ambiguity, separating the roles of the author, narrator, and protagonist. His use of third-person pronouns, the absence of named characters, and the lack of specific temporal or spatial markers create an atmosphere of detachment and universal applicability. This type of literature is called the hidden or multiple-interpretation autobiography, characterised by illusion and fantasy.

As for writing the biography, Wole Soyinka's writing suggested that he aimed to generalise his experiences so that others could learn from them, while Taha Hussein stated that his purpose was personal: to escape the heavy problems and worries he encountered at that time. However, the real purpose of each author emerged from the events of their biography. An educational or generalising purpose that Wole Soyinka assumed and the personal purpose that Taha Hussein expressed. He succeeded in using generalization to describe the state of society, represented by the main character of his story, whose features were not clearly defined and could represent any boy. As a result, what was described as fantasy or illusion in his view became less fantasy and more credible than in Wole Soyinka's view.

The contrast in pronoun usage – first-person in Soyinka's work versus third-person in Hussein's – reflects their differing narrative intents. Soyinka's subjective approach immerses the reader in personal experiences, while Hussein's objective

detachment allows for broader societal interpretation. Despite the difference in the literary form of the two works – Wole Soyinka's traditional autobiography and Taha Hussein's hidden or multi-interpreted autobiography – they agreed that each should have its own language through which to express itself and its goal.

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