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BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARIES : SOURCES OF EMINENT  
WOMEN IN THE ISLAMIC HISTORY  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO  
TARIKH BAGHDAD AND TARIKH MADINAT DIMASHQ

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF  
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BY

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الجامعة الإسلامية العالمية ماليزيا  
INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA  
بُونَيْرُوسِيَّتِي إِسْلَامِيَّةً إِنْبَارًا إِجْسَابًا مِلْدِيَّتِيَا

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## ABSTRACT

With the notion that biographical dictionaries serve as an indispensable source for the information we had on women in the history of Islam, this study attempts to examine *Tarājim al-Nisā'* of *Tārikh Baghdād* and *Tarājim al-Nisā'* of *Tārikh Madīnat Dimashq* with the aim to extract as much information as possible on the subject and thus adds to the collections of writings on Muslim women. Essentially, the problem of gender is not of Muslims' concern, yet, such a research is now considered vital in order to apprehend the real standing of women in the Islamic society and simultaneously to refute any alien idea imposed on us, notably at the time when feminism has already penetrated into the minds of some Muslim women. It is hoped that the historical approach applied throughout this study can be a ground for further researches and findings in the future.

The introductory chapter of this study begins with a general overview on biographical dictionaries which includes among other things, the discussion on the interconnection of biography with the science of *ḥadīth*, history and *al-ansāb*; its classifications and arrangements; its possibilities and constraints and also the writings on women. The first chapter gives a prosopography of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī and Ibn 'Asākir, the authors of *Tārikh Baghdād* and *Tārikh Madīnat Dimashq*; whereas the second chapter focusses on the pennings of both *Tarājim al-Nisā'*. The final chapter of the thesis moves into the life of prominent women mentioned in the dictionaries and their involvement in the intellectual activities, ṣūfism, family life, political and legal affairs, economical activities, poetry and music.

The study concludes that despite of their limitations, the biographical dictionaries do offer considerable information and invaluable insights on the subjects of women, more than the researchers have ever anticipated. However, in order to come out with satisfying results, the researchers need to explore new dimensions of working with this genre. Augmented sources and extant writings, in particular the ones written by Muslim scholars of the past, would provide us with a clearer picture of the history of Muslim women.

... The simple answer must be that every recovered bit of the past has at least the potential of stimulating an expansion of knowledge and insight and thereby contributing to progress.  
(Franz Rosenthal)

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Biographical Dictionaries: A General Overview

We, Muslims, have inherited valuable treasures from our ancestors, not in the form of gold and gemstones mines, but voluminous literary works. This clearly indicates their great achievement in the intellectual field. One type of work which we should be proud of, takes the form of biographical dictionaries. Various biographical dictionaries, excluding many more which are still undiscovered, denote the awareness of our learned men about the importance of recording historical data and facts besides appreciating and acknowledging the ability and capability of other people.

#### A. Origin and Relation of Biographical Dictionaries with *Ḥadīth*, *Tārīkh* and *Ansāb*

Islamic biographical dictionaries, also known by few other names such as *ṭabaqāt*, *siyar*, *tarājim*, *rijāl*, *tārīkh*, *wafayāt*, *mu'jam* and *mashāhir*,<sup>1</sup> are " a wholly indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> Different names may denote difference in classification, method, arrangement and selectivity of entries. For example, *ṭabaqāt* denotes the arrangement according to a unique chronological order that exclusively belonged to Islamic sciences. Yet, in the later period, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt*, were not necessarily composed in the same arrangement. For example, *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyyah* of al-Sulami and *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyyah al-Kubrā* of al-Subki were arranged according to an alphabetical order. *Wafayāt* signifies the selection and arrangement of entries according to the year in which the notables died and *Siyar* usually refers to biographies of substantial length for instance, the early biography of the Prophet s.a.w., *Sirah Ibn Hishām*. *Tarājim* seems to be restricted to shorter biographical notices.

creation of the Islamic Community " <sup>2</sup> that are not borrowed from any other civilization, but rather developed in line with the development of some other Islamic sciences. Modern historians have come out with different theories regarding the origin of this Islamic genre, some opt to relate it to *ḥadīth* <sup>3</sup> and some to *tārīkh*.<sup>4</sup> Some even traced the origin to the geneology or *al-ansāb* <sup>5</sup> which was the expertise of the Arabs since the pre-Islamic period.

Equipped with a clear conscience on the emergence of Islamic sciences<sup>6</sup> in particular, the science of *ḥadīth*, on the one hand, and the history of Muslim historiography,<sup>7</sup> on the other, it is not hard to grasp the rationale of theories pertaining to the origin of biographical dictionaries. The compilation of *ḥadīth* that began as early as the time of the Prophet s.a.w., reached a stage where by, the need to verify the validity and the authenticity of *ḥadīth* by examining the chains of transmission and identifying the

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<sup>2</sup> Hamilton Gibb, " Islamic Biographical Literature, " *Historians of the Middle East*, eds. Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 54. Henceforth, cited as *Islamic Biographical Literature*.

<sup>3</sup> W. Heffening and I. Hafsi are among those historians who advocate that biographical dictionaries exist as an offspring of the science of *ḥadīth*. See W. Heffening, " Tabakat," in *First Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Supplement) (1987), 9: 214-15. Henceforth cited as *Tabakat*. Also, I. Hafsi, " Recherches sur le Genre Ṭabaqāt dans la Littérature Arabe, " *Arabica* 23 (1976): 227-65; 24 (1977): 1-41, 150-86; Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994), 13. Henceforth, cited as *Women in Islamic Biographical Collection*.

<sup>4</sup> Gibb tends to associate this genre with history, which to him ' developed simultaneously and in close association with historical composition. ' Likewise, Rosenthal, whom by referring to the definition of history, believes that biography is a part of historical literature , which nobody is able to exclude it while treating the Muslim historiography. See Gibb, *Islamic Biographical Literature*, 54 and Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 100. Hereafter, cited as *Muslim Historiography*.

<sup>5</sup> We are not able to name the scholars who hold this view and even Roded, while treating the matter, only mentions ' other experts ' without identifying their names. See *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> For an interesting discussion on the concept of Islamic science and its emergence, see Alparslan Açıkgöç, *Islamic Science: Towards A Definition* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1996). Henceforth, cited as *Islamic Science*. To understand the development of the science of *ḥadīth*, see Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature: Its Origin, Development and Special Features*, ed. and rev. Abdal Hakam Murad (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), passim. Henceforth, cited as *Ḥadith Literature*.

<sup>7</sup> Among the best writings on the development of Muslim historiography are provided by H. A. R. Gibb, " Ta'rikh, " in *First Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Supplement) (1987) 9: 233-45; *Muslim Historiography*; and Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Henceforth, cited as *Arabic Historical Thought*.

unreliable sources from the reliable ones, became of paramount importance.<sup>8</sup> The urgent need then accelerated the emergence of *'Ilm al-Jarḥ wa al-Ta'dil*, which simultaneously boosted a large number of books on the biography of the Companions and *rijāl al-ḥadīth* that came after, for instance, *al-Istī'āb fī Ma'rīfat al-Aṣḥāb* of Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1070) *Usud al-Ghābah fī Ma'rīfat al-Ṣaḥābah* of Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233), *Kitāb al-Rijāl al-Kabīr* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), *Kitāb al-Jarḥ wa al-Ta'dil* of 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938), *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥuffāz* of al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), *Kitāb al-Kāmil fī al-Ḍu'afā' al-Rijāl* of Ibn 'Adī (d. 365/976) and *Kitāb al-Ḍu'afā' wa'l-Matrūkin* of al-Nasā'ī (d. 344/955). Interestingly, Young states that the earliest written Islamic biographical dictionary is *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Muḥaddithīn* of al-Mu'āfā b. 'Imrān al-Mawṣilī (d. 184/800).<sup>9</sup> Though no copy is extant, the title alone gives a clear indication to the origin of this genre, that is *ḥadīth*.

The idea to relate this genre to history has also a very strong basis. Biographical dictionary which begins as an offshoot of the science of *ḥadīth*, later on developed as a product of history. Yet, the writing of biographical dictionaries that developed into a different spectrum, still possessed strong influence of *ḥadīth* elements, notably evident in the application of *isnād*. The tendency of early biographers to prefer prominent religious scholars, to other groups of elites, makes incorporation of this genre with *ḥadīth* and its sciences inevitable. This close association between biographical dictionaries, *ḥadīth* and history resulted from the Muslims' attitude that regards *ḥadīth* as "the most noble

<sup>8</sup> If we look into the introductions of several biographical dictionaries, we may sense the priority given to the *ḥadīth* and its sciences, which became auxiliary to the Qur'ān, and thus, recording the biography of the Prophet s.a.w., the Companions and those who came after, in order to ensure the validity of the *ḥadīths* and of the narrators, is rendered necessary. See, for example the introductions of Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Iṣābah fī Tamyiz al-Ṣaḥābah*, eds. al-Shaykh 'Ādil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd and al-Shaykh 'Alī Muḥammad Mu'awwad, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1415/1995), 153. Hereafter, cited as *al-Iṣābah*. Also, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī'āb fī Ma'rīfat al-Aṣḥāb*, eds. al-Shaykh 'Alī Muḥammad Mu'awwad and al-Shaykh 'Ādil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1415/1995), 117.

<sup>9</sup> M. J. L. Young, "Arabic Biographical Writing," *Religion, Learning and Science in the 'Abbasid Period*, eds. M. J. L. Young, J. D. Latham and R. B. Serjeant (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 172. Henceforth, cited as *Arabic Biographical Writing*.

religious knowledge. "<sup>10</sup> In the introduction of his biographical dictionary, Ibn al-'Imād (d. 1089/1679) says:

This is a treatise on the reminiscence of the prominent predecessors, which I compiled, so as to be a momento for me and those who remember, a lesson for those who ponder and those who reflect..Indeed, the preservation of history is important, and the necessity of its religious benefit is known, especially of the obituaries of *al-muḥaddithin*, and the bearers of the Prophet's tradition...<sup>11</sup>

Many authors employed the term *tārikh* as a title for their works, as depicted by al-Sakhāwī: " All (of these authors) are agreed in calling (their works of this type) " history " (*ta'rikh*). Some (authors), however called their works *Ṭabaqāt*... "<sup>12</sup> Examples of these are al-Khāṭib al-Baghḍādī (d. 463/1070) in his *Tārikh Baghdād*, Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571/ 1176) in his *Tārikh Madīnah Dimashq*, al-Dhahabī in his *Tārikh al-Islām*, Ibn al-'Adīm (d. 660/1262) in his *Bughyat al-Ṭalab fī Tārikh Ḥalab* and al-Muḥibbī (d. 1111/ 1169) in his *Tārikh Khulāṣat al-Āthār fī A'yān al-Qarn al-Ḥādī 'Aṣhar*. The naming obviously portrays that this genre is synonymous with the Islamic history. By writing such works, the authors had a full intention to produce a historical literature.

However, it is important to point out here that, though biographical dictionaries may appear to serve the science of *ḥadīth*, some of them are not written for this purpose. It is also noteworthy that for brevity, some biographical dictionaries do not have a complete *isnād*. Some of the authors were not as strict as compared to their treatment in the science of *ḥadīth*, and most of the time, they left the readers to scrutinize and ponder upon the facts given. Thus, it is not proper to use such biographical dictionaries for the research on *isnād*.<sup>13</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200-1201) says that he used to resolve on adding *isnād* to

<sup>10</sup> *Al-Iṣābah*, 153.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn al-'Imād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab fī Akhbār man Dhahab*, vol. 1 (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Tijārī li al-Ṭabā'ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', n.d.), 110. Henceforth, cited as *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Sakhāwī, *al-I'lān bi al-Tawbikh li man Dhamma al-Tārikh* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 316. Hereafter, cited as *al-I'lān*. The translation is cited from *Muslim Historiography*, 500.

<sup>13</sup> M. M. Azami, *Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature: With a Critical Edition of Some Early Texts*. (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1978), 218. Henceforth cited as *Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature*.

his writing, but he had to refrain himself, so as not to make his book huge in volume.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes, the biographers clearly state that they do not intend their works to be related to *ḥadīth*, for example, al-Ghazzī (d. 1062/ 1651), in his *Kawākib al-Sā'irah*, says that he has composed his dictionary, not as a traditionist, but rather " in the style of traditionists. "<sup>15</sup>

Biographical dictionaries also serve the history of other sciences, for example in the history of *tafsīr*, we have *Ṭabaqāt al-Mufasssirin* of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) and *Ṭabaqāt al-Mufasssirin* of Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Dāwūdī (d. 945/1538); in *fiqh*, many dictionaries are specified for different schools of Islamic jurisprudence such as *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'iyyah* of al-Asnawī (d. 772/1370), *Tāj al-Tarājim fī Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanafīyyah* of Ibn Quṭlūbhā (d. 879/1474), *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah* of Abū Ya'lā (d. 526/1131), *Tartīb al-Madārik wa Targhib al-Masālik li Ma'rifat A'lām Madhhab al-Imām Mālik* of Qāḍī 'Iyāq; in linguistics and literature, we have *Ṭabaqāt al-Nahwiyyin wa al-Lughawīyyin* of al-Zubaydī (d. 989/ 1581), *Bughyat al-Wu'āt fī Ṭabaqāt al-Lughawīyyin wa al-Nuḥāt* of al-Suyūṭī, *Mu'jam al-Udabā'* of Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229); in philosophy and medicine, we have *Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā' wa al-Ḥukamā'* of Ibn Juljul (d. 399/1009), *Ikhbār al-'Ulamā' bi Akhbār al-Ḥukamā'* of al-Qifṭī (d. 646/1248), and *'Uyūn al-Anbā' fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā'* of Ibn Abi Uṣaybi'ah (d. 668/1270); and in political history, we have *Itti'āz al-Ḥunafā' bi Akhbār al-Khulafā'* of al-Maqrizī (d. 845/1441), *Tuḥfat al-Zurafā' fī Tawārikh al-Mulūk wa al-Khulafā'* of Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Bā'ūnī al-Dimashqī (d. 870/1466).

Since geneology has been the concern of Arab from the pre Islamic age, its significant penetration into the writings of biographical dictionaries is not a surprise. As a

<sup>14</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *Al-Muntaẓam fī Tārikh a-Umam wa al-Mulūk*, eds. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā and Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1412/1982), 118. Henceforth, cited as *al-Muntaẓam*.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Ghazzī, *Kawākib al-Sā'irah fī A'yān Mi'at al-'Āshirah*, ed. Jibrā'il Sulaymān Jabbūr, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadidah, 1979), 4. Also Tarif Khalidī, "Islamic Biographical Dictionaries: A Preliminary Assessment," *The Muslim World* 63 (1973), 58. Hereafter, cited as *Islamic Biographical Dictionaries*.

matter of fact, almost every Arab biographer is a geneologist, though the degree of attention given by the authors differed from one another. Ibn al-Anbarī, for example, paid less attention to the geneological aspect in contrast to Ibn Khallikān (d. 681/1282), who was able to provide twenty one generations of Iṣḥāq b. Rāḥawayh's (d. 238/853) ascendants and ten generations of Abū 'Umayrah Shurayḥ b. al-Ḥarīth al-Kindī's (d. 187/706) ascendants.<sup>16</sup>

## B. Motives of Writing

Unfortunately, Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845), the author of the earliest extant biographical dictionary, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, was silent with regard to his motive and purpose of composing such an important work. So was al-Bukhārī in his *al-Tārīkh al-Kabīr*. As works that serve the science of *ḥadīth*, the motive of writing is obvious, that is; to prove the authenticity of the *ḥadīth* by examining the narators, to see whether they were *thiqāt*, *mutqinūn*, *ṣadūq*, *ḍu'afā'*, *waddā'ūn* or *kadhḥābūn* and so on. In fact, the writing of biographical dictionaries is regarded as *wujūb kifāyah*, a religious duty of the Muslim community. Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1448), says:

...after Companions, there were people who devoted themselves to memorising and transmitting [of *ahādīth*]. Similarly, those who came after. Yet, after the Companions, there was, in every period, a group of people who did not possess an ability to memorise and to transmit. Thus, they made mistakes. There were also those who forged deliberately. Then, Allah resurrected many groups of this *ummah* to defend on the *Sunnah* of the Prophet s.a.w., they talked on the narrators with the intention to advise. Thus, it is not considered *ghībah* (slander). In fact, it is a collective obligatory (*wujūb kifāyah*) for them...<sup>17</sup>.

As a historical genre, it is inevitable that the motive for writing biographical dictionaries is generally shared by most historian biographers, viz., to commemorate the people of the past who had excelled in their life. The preservation of their biographies is considered important for the posterity to emulate them. If it is essential to record the life of

<sup>16</sup> *Arabic Biographical Writing*, 179.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Lisān al-Mizān*, vol. I (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lami li al-Matbū'at, 1406/1986), 3-4.

the Prophet s.a.w., it is equally important to preserve the history of the Companions, Successors, Followers and other prominent groups so as to inspire the generations that come after with their moral and intellectual edification. It is noteworthy that biographical writings serves a popular need in a society, which loves to know stories of the Prophets, biographies of kings and rulers, lives of scholars and those eminent of their time as well as of the past.<sup>18</sup>

Muḥy al-Din Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir al-Qurashiy al-Ḥanafī (d. 775/1373), in his *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanafīyyah* enumerates a number of reasons that motivate the writing of biographical dictionaries :

It is very instructive and extremely important for a number of reasons to discuss the biographies of (religious) scholars with the details of their life, their qualities, the times in which they lived, and their position (in scholarship). One of the reasons, for instance, is that it gives one confidence in himself. The verse of the Qur'ān: 'Does not the memory of God give confidence?', was interpreted by a number of ancient scholars as referring to the memory of the men around Muḥammad. This is well possible. These men were distinguished above all others by the privilege of having seen the prophet, by the fact that they were his faithful followers, and by the fact that they (alone) were in the possession of the knowledge (of the Prophetic traditions). Another reason is that (the discussion of the biographies of religious scholars) enables the student to reach the educational level of those scholars and to learn from their good actions and qualities. Furthermore, it serves to put every scholar in his proper place and to avoid assigning inferior positions to important authorities or elevating others beyond their proper positions. 'He is more learned than any scholar.' Muḥammad referred to this in the tradition: 'Let the patient and intelligent men among you be close to me.' A further reason is that the discussion of the biographies of religious scholars enables the student to rely in the case of contradictory opinions upon the most learned and austere authorities. Furthermore, it gives information about their publications and helps to evaluate their usefulness. Lastly, it stops any criticism directed against some one on account of the obscurity of his authorities, as well as any attempt by others to consider them little known.<sup>19</sup>

The biographical literature had undergone a rapid growth due to the unremitting endeavor of scholars who possessed unquenchable thirst in the matter. They complemented works that had been done by their predecessors and made them better, as evident in *Fawā'id*

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<sup>18</sup> *Al-Muntaẓam*, 115.

<sup>19</sup> *Al-I'lān*, 60. Translation of the text is adopted from *Muslim Historiography*, 310.



*al-Wafayât* of al-Kutubi (d. 764/1363), who aimed at complementing the insufficiency found in *Wafayât al-A'yân* of Ibn Khallikân. The task then was carried out further by al-Şafadi (d. 764/1363) in his *Kitâb al-Wâfi bi Fawât al-Wafayât*. They also summarized the lengthy volumes of biographical works so as to facilitate the users to access these huge volumes; for example Ibn Manzûr (d. 711/1311) wrote *al-Mukhtaşar fi Târikh Dimashq* as a concise version of *Târikh Madînah Dimashq*. Furthermore, they wrote abridgements (*dhayl*) of the works of past biographers, as done by Ibn al-Najjâr al-Baghdâdi (d. 643/1245) who wrote *Dhayl Târikh Baghdâd*, an abridgement of *Târikh Baghdâd* of al-Khaţîb al-Baghdâdi.

Moreover, they referred to their predecessors' works and produced works of their own which were more general in nature, that ranged from the early period of the Islamic history up to their time, and included in their writings the most distinguished people without limiting them to any particular groups or period. Examples of this kind of work are *Târikh al-Islâm wa Wafayât Mashâhir al-A'lâm* of al-Dhahabî, which utilized many great works such as *Sirat al-Nabî* of Ibn Ishâq (d. 151/768), *al-Ṭabaqât al-Kubrâ* of al-Wâqidî (d. 207/823), *Târikh* of al-Bukhârî, *Târikh* of Abî Bakr b. Abî Shaybah (d. 297/909), *Târikh* of Khalifah b. Khayyâṭ (d. 280/854), *Târikh* of Abî Zur'ah al-Dimashqî (d. 280/893), *Târikh Baghdâd*, *Târikh Madînat Dimashq*, *Târikh* of Abî Sa'id al-Sam'ânî (d. 562/1167), *al-Kâmil* of Ibn 'Adî and the like. Possessing such enthusiastic spirits, Muslim biographers devoted their lives to record every notables known to them, thus as a result, biographical dictionaries represent an extensive genre of Islamic historiography. Al-Dhahabî, in his introduction of *Târikh Islâm* says:

....If I were to cover every single biography and event, surely this book will reach 100 volumes or even more, for in the book there are 100 figures of whom I am able to report of their affairs in 50 volumes. <sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Al-Dhahabî, *Târikh al-Islâm wa Wafayât Mashâhir wa al-A'lâm*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salâm Tadmuri, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dâr al-Kitâb al-'Arabî, 1409/1989), 12. Henceforth, cited as *Târikh al-Islâm*.

### C. Classification and Arrangement

With the number that may exceed hundreds of thousands of volumes, it is just inevitable that this rich genre varies in terms of classification and by no means bows to any uniformity of methodology and arrangement. Since the motives or purposes of writing differ from one author to another, it is not at all surprising to find that some biographical dictionaries are devoted specifically to particular categories of notable individuals such as the *ṣahābi*, scholars from different schools of thought, individuals in various professions or human endeavors such as Qur'ān readers, *ḥadīth* experts, jurists, kings, *wazīrs*, grammarians, littérateurs, poets, *sūfīs*, singers and physicians.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, we have dictionaries that focus on particular regions or cities.<sup>22</sup> The writing of this type of biographical dictionaries is pioneered by al-Khāṭib al-Baghdādī in his *Tārīkh Baghdād*, then followed by other biographers, for example Ibn 'Asākir in his *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq* and Ibn Bashkuwal (d. 578/1182) in his *Kitāb al-Ṣilah fī Tārīkh A'immat al-Andalūs wa 'Ulamā'ihim wa Muḥaddithihim wa Fuqahā'ihim wa Udabā'ihim*. Thirdly, there are centennial dictionaries that focus on particular period of time such as *Durar al-Kāminah fī A'yān Mi'at al-Thāminah* of Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1484), *al-Ḍaw' al-Lāmi' li Ahl al-Qarn al-Tāsi'* of al-Shakhāwī (d. 902/1492), *al-Kawākib al-Sā'irah fī A'yān Mi'at al-'Āshirah* of al-Ghazzī, *Khulāṣāt al-Athār fī A'yān al-Qarn al-Ḥādī 'Ashar* of al-Muḥibbi (d. 1056/1646) and *Silk al-Durar fī A'yān al-Qarn al-Thāni 'Ashar* of al-Murādī (d. 1206/1791). Fourthly, there are general biographical dictionaries, which encompass all groups of individuals regardless of their localities and period, for example, *Wafayāt al-A'yān* of Ibn Khallikān, *Tārīkh al-Islām* of al-Dhahabi and *Naẓm al-Iqyān fī A'yān al-A'yān* of al-Suyūṭī.

<sup>21</sup> *Al-I'ān*, passim.

<sup>22</sup> R. S. Humphreys states that "this genre of historical writing did not reflect a tradition of local political autonomy as such, but it was rooted in local patriotism, the desire of the urban notables to show that their native cities were major centers of Islamic piety and learning." See *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1991), 132.

The arrangement of entries also varies from one dictionary to another. The earliest dictionaries were arranged according to *ṭabaqāt*,<sup>23</sup> namely the arrangement in strata by generations. Heffening contends that " the ṭabaqāt literature did not arise out of the necessities of the criticism of Tradition, " rather it " owes its origin to the interest of the Arabs in geneology and biography. "<sup>24</sup> However, considering the evolvement of *ṭabaqāt* literature from the need to verify the authenticity of *ḥadīth* by examining its narrators, we believe that this kind of arrangement served as an important tool in the science of *ḥadīth*. Later on, the authors applied the alphabetical system which is more convenient for the researchers. In his introduction to *Wafayāt al-A'yān*, Ibn Khallikān said:

The results which I obtained incited me to increase the stock which I had acquired, and to redouble my researches; I applied my mind therefore to study of works written specially on the subject, and gathered from the mouths of the masters versed in this science, that information which I could not find in books; I preserved in this pursuit till I had amassed a large quantity of documents roughly drawn up, which contained the events of a great number of years; I had also another portion of these facts impressed on my memory. It so happened that, however, that when I had to recur to my notes, I could not find what I sought unless with some difficulty, because they were not regularly arranged; I was therefore obliged to class them and I adopted the alphabetical order, judging it more convenient than chronological.<sup>25</sup>

Some authors listed the notices according to the arrangement of obituary (*wafayāt*), namely, the year in which the individuals died. Al-Dhahābī (d. 748/1348), following this method said:

The ancients did not bother with the proper fixation of the (dates of death). they relied upon their memory. Therefore, the dates of death of many prominent men around Muḥammad and subsequent (generations) until close to the time of aš-Šhāfi'ī are lost. The more recent scholars then concerned themselves with the fixation of the dates of death of (religious) scholars and other (persons). They went so far as to establish (the dates of death) of a number of persons who, as far as our knowledge of them goes,

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<sup>23</sup> *Tabakat*, 214-15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Khallikān, *Kitāb Wafayāt al-A'yān*, trans. by B<sup>n</sup> Mac Guckin De Slane, vol. 1 (New York and London: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1843), 2. Henceforth, cited as *Wafayāt (translation)*.

are (practically) unknown (individuals) are preserved, whereas those of certain well-known religious leaders are not known.<sup>26</sup>

#### D. Writings on Women

Apparently, it is not widely known that Muslim libraries do possess a multifarious of books written specifically on women<sup>27</sup> and this sole ignorance is sufficient to cloud people's mind with confusion and misunderstanding with regard to the role played by Muslim women as well as the treatment they received from their male counterpart. Nobody can deny the fact that male scholars of the past had never shut their eyes to the contributions of women in the building of Islamic civilization. Hence, we found the insertion of female entries in their renowned works, either interspersed with the male entries or placed in a separate section. For example, *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt al-Kabir* of Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) contains 629 women notices out of 4250 entries, *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt* of Khalifah b. Khayyāt contains 128 notices out of 3375, *Kitāb al-Thiqāt* of Ibn Hibbān (d. 354/965) contains 324 out of 11,489, *al-Isti'āb fī Ma'rifat al-Aṣḥāb* of Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d.463/1070) contains 399 out of 4225, *Ṣifat al-Ṣafwah* of Ibn al-Jawzi (d.597/ 1201) contains 240 out of 1033, *Wāfi bi al-Wafayāt* of al-Ṣafadi (d. 764/1362) contains 281 out of 9283, *al-Iṣābah* of Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalāni (d.852/1449) contains 1551 out of 12,304 and *al-Ḍaw' al-Lāmi'* of al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497) contains 1075 out of 11,691.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, we have biographical works written solely on women, such as *al-Rawḍah al-Fayḥā' fī Tawārikh al-Nisā'* of Yāsīn al-Khaṭīb al-'Umri b. Khayr'l-Lāh al-Khaṭīb al-'Umri al-Mawṣili<sup>29</sup> (d. 1232/1817), *A'lām al-Nisā' fī 'Ālamay al-'Arab wa al-Islām* of 'Umar

<sup>26</sup> *Tārīkh al-Islām*, vol.1, 7-8. The English translation is cited from Rosenthal, *Muslim Historiography*, 512.

<sup>27</sup> A brief study has been done by Dr. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Munajjid to counter argue the claim that accuses the Muslims as being discriminative towards their female members, in such a way that the latter have been left out from the Islamic literary works. In doing so, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Munajjid, by looking through several bio-bibliographical works, has come out with thirteen types of writings on women, which contain innumerable books which he himself do not able to cover all. See Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Munajjid, "Mā Ullifa 'an al-Nisā'," *Majallāt al-Majma' al-'Ilmi al-'Arabi* 16 (1941): 212-19.

<sup>28</sup> For a list of women in the Islamic biographical dictionaries from year 230/845 to 1987, see *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Khaṭīb al-'Umri states in his introduction of *al-Rawḍah al-Fayḥā'* that he did not find any history book written specifically on women and he did not heard of any one who planned to compose such a

Riḍā Kahhālāh (d. 1408/1984), *Mu'jam al-Nisā' al-Yamāniyyāt* of 'Abd'l-Lāh Muḥammad al-Ḥabashī, *A'lām al-Nisā' al-Mu'mināt* of Muḥammad al-Ḥassūn and his wife Umm 'Alī Mashkūr and Biographical Dictionary of Prominent Muslim Ladies of Kabir Kausar and Inamul Kabir.

Though the number of female entries may look small in comparison with the number of male entries, it does not lessen the significance value underlying the information available in the female entries. Admitting this, Gibb says : " The biographical dictionaries also supply almost the sole materials for the social activities and status of women in Muslim communities "30 and thus, this genre can be considered as a major source for eminent Muslim women in the Islamic history.

Despite the limitation of the nature of biographical dictionaries, which we will mention later, we are fortunate to have records of many prominent women hidden behind sheets of papers indicating the crucial role, which they played in the past. They involved in most spheres of life wherein men were also involved and thus contributed to the making of Islamic civilization throughout history. Gibb says:

Thus it is clear that the history of the Islamic Community is essentially the contribution of individual men and women to the building up and transmission of its specific culture; that it is these persons (rather than the political governors) who represent or reflective the active forces in Muslim society in their respective spheres; and that their individual contributions are worthy of being recorded for future generations.<sup>31</sup>

This written fact, reflects the truthfulness of al-Qur'an, whence Allah says that the believers men and women are protectors and complements to one another:

The believers, men and women, are protectors one of another: they enjoy what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practise regular charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger. On them Alah will pour His Mercy: for Allah is Exalted in power, Wise. (*Sūrāt al-Tawbah*, 9: 71)<sup>32</sup>

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work. Hence, he took the initiative. See *al-Rawḍah al-Fayḥā' fi Tawārikh al-Nisā'*, ed. 'Imād 'Alī Ḥamzah (n.p: al-Dār al-'Ālamiyyah, 1407/1987), 38. Henceforth cited as *al-Rawḍah al-Fayḥā'*.

<sup>30</sup> *Islamic Biographical Literature*, 58.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>32</sup> 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, new edition with revised translation and commentary (Brentwood: Amana Corporation, 1412/1992), 459. Henceforth cited as *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*.

As regards the unequal proportion of men and women in the biographical dictionaries, it is a bit premature for Ruth Roded to say, by her sheer judgement from the figure, that:

Some authors did not regard any women as important enough to warrant a biographical dictionary in their collections, and none included women in proportion to their numbers in the population as a whole. In many classical biographical dictionaries, however, from less than one percent to 23 percent of the entries were for women, as were from one to 15000 individual biographies.<sup>33</sup>

Did " some authors " really exclude women from their biographical dictionaries just because there was no important woman at their time or was it because of a difficult access to the female figures due to some reasons? Is there any dictionary of the past that mentions a specific reason for the inclusion of women entries, or mentions the reason of not including them? The reason itself, if there is any, may vary. Presumably for example, because of the traditional practice of Arabs to put women behind the veil, and thus the difficult access, or because those women did not correspond with the principles of selection outlined by the biographers. Whatever the reason is, it will remain undefinitive unless a thorough research is carried out so as to provide conclusive answers for the inquiry. However, it should be emphasized here, that the treatment of women in the Islamic writings is by no means similar to the Western treatment of the same subject. The problem, which al-Attas names as " a crisis of identity between the sexes " <sup>34</sup> is indeed alien to the Islamic society! Hence, the approach to the writing of Muslim women should be different from its Western counterpart.

#### **E. Constraints and Possibilities: Ways to Approach Biographical Dictionaries**

Despite rich information and remarkable promises, this genre has its own limitation. Researchers have to accept the fact that many manuscripts are still missing,

<sup>33</sup> *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islām* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 83.

and among the ones available, some are still incomplete. Not to mention the fact that many manuscripts available are anxiously waiting to be edited and critically edited. Without the edition copy, a systematic analysis of these biographical dictionaries is of no avail. In short, more effort and time are needed in order to fully utilize this important genre of the Islamic legacy, so as more novel independent work can be produced. It is indeed, an "enormous task which demands extensive research."<sup>35</sup>

As one of the popular historical genres, biographical dictionaries were often cited as sources, but unfortunately, very seldom they were fully utilized in order to produce independent novel works. The fact that we have multifarious collections of biographical dictionaries in various forms and arrangements has not been of much help as it is known that the genre is inadequate in nature and sporadic in manner. Thus, to be simply dependent on it alone can not provide us with well documented historical accounts. In fact, it is not wrong to say that any study done on this genre represents a noble attempt to present pieces of puzzles which are waiting for the next researchers to put them together and present them as a complete and comprehensive picture of the Islamic history. Gibb says:

With the exceptions noted above, they supply also valuable data for social history and institutions, but in more sporadic and anecdotal fashion, and which have often to be combined with materials from other sources to become fully intelligible. In this respect, the earlier comprehensive works (Ibn Sa'd, al-Aghāni, Tārikh Baghdād, and perhaps also Ibn 'Asākir) are of special value, both by reason of their wide fields of selection and discursiveness, and because of the relative paucity of other surviving materials.....<sup>36</sup>

Some point out the limitation of biographical dictionaries to particular groups of people, namely the elites, as a constraint to the utilization of this genre. Very rarely the biographers include laymen in their works. As previously mentioned, the writing of history serves the commemoration of outstanding figures so that the qualities of their character

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<sup>35</sup> Munir-ud-Din Aḥmed, *Muslim Education and the Scholars' Social Status up to the 5th Century Muslim Era in the Light of Tārikh Baghdād* (Zurich: Verlag der Islam, 1968), v. Henceforth, cited as *Muslim Education in Tārikh Baghdād*.

<sup>36</sup> *Islamic Biographical Literature*, 58.

and their high achievement will be adopted by posterity. Al-Sakhāwi, for example maintains that :

God has not created men equal in knowledge and that in every generation there are only a few to whom the others must turn in times of crisis. Since most scholars of his generation were not really deserving of the name, in his view, it becomes imperative to place each in his proper degree.<sup>37</sup>

If this is the case with the group of scholars, let alone laymen who held no significant status in the eyes of society. To expect information pertaining to commoners is seemingly unattainable. Nevertheless, there might be incidental aspects of information that may catch our attention, but again, verification of results would be difficult. Therefore, we must understand the aim that motivated the writing of biographical dictionaries and in doing so we are prepared to anticipate the sifted data which may be not up to our expectation.

The constraints mentioned should never hinder researchers' enthusiasm to discover valuable and useful information. As Munir-ud-Din Ahmed remarks: " existing material which is scattered in a great number of historical books, has not yet been examined duely."<sup>38</sup> With the help of historiographical records as represented in biographical dictionaries, more extensive works has been successfully produced either by the near contemporaries of the authors or by scholars of recent time.<sup>39</sup> Usually, biographical dictionaries are used as references supporting the information provided by modern scholars

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<sup>37</sup> *Islamic Biographical Dictionaries*, 58.

<sup>38</sup> *Muslim Education in Tārīkh Baghdād*, v.

<sup>39</sup> Now, there are several recent studies that systematically utilized biographical dictionaries as source materials. As a matter of fact, they have come out with remarkable findings that add to the collection of writings on the Islamic socio history . To name a few, see Abdūlgaffour Ismail Rozi, *The Social Role of Scholars ('Ulama') in Islamic Spain: A Study of Medieval Biographical Dictionaries*, PhD Dissertation, Boston University, 1983 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1983). By referring to *Tārīkh 'Ulamā' al-Andalus* of Ibn al-Farādi, *Kitāb al-Ṣīlah* of Ibn Bashkuwal and *Ṣīlah al-Ṣīlah* of Ibn al-Zubayr, Rozi attempts a study on 3611 biographies of *fuqahā'*, in order to find out the social role they played, not only as religious scholars, but also as merchants and artisans. Living independently from the political patronage, they had played an active role as intermediaries between the political and tribal elites, and the common people. Also, Malakah Abyaḍ, *al-Tarbiyyah wa al-Thaqāfah al-'Arabiyyah al-Islāmiyyah fī al-Shām wa al-Jazīrah Khilāl al-Qurūn al-Ūlā li al-Hijrah* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li'l-Malāyīn, 1980), a study on the Islamic educational system within a particular locality and period, that sees political and economical aspects as factors, which influenced the educational system Muslim had in the past. Another example is Munir-ud-Din Aḥmed, *Muslim Education and the Scholars' Social Status up to the 5th Century Muslim Era in the Light of Tārīkh Baghdād*, a study on the educational system of the pre *madrasah* period.