

**Literature of Confession and Raw Disclosure: Between Breaking Taboos and Reshaping Identity**

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**Abstract:**

*This article explores the concept of confessional literature and raw self-disclosure as a space for uninhibited self-expression, challenging the social and cultural constraints imposed by taboos. It examines how this literary mode contributes to the reconstruction of individual and collective identity through the candid revelation of personal experiences, including sensitive and silenced issues.*

*Additionally, it analyzes the impact of such writing on the reader, oscillating between empathy and shock, and its role in deconstructing normative perceptions while reconsidering the boundaries between the private and the public, as well as the permissible and the forbidden within literary discourse.*

**Key words:** *Identity, Self, Confession, Narrative, Experience.*

**The presentation:**

Life writing has become one of the most prominent literary forms in the modern era, emerging from the evolving awareness of the self and serving as a medium for expressing thoughts and affirming existence. In the presence of words, the self-sheds its masks, exposing its hidden fractures and repressed pain. Through this process, individual experience transforms into raw disclosure, weaving the intricate fabric of identity within the space of narrative and creative writing. Among the most distinctive manifestations of this form is confessional literature, a unique creative experience that delves into the depths of the writing self, embracing and revealing it. Through confession, unspoken crises resurface issues long neglected by collective consciousness.

Both the Arab East and Maghreb have witnessed the flourishing of this mode of writing, attracting authors who sought to document their personal experiences and intimate struggles. When self-disclosure intertwines with the notion of freedom, confessional writing often ventures into forbidden territories, challenging societal norms and rearticulating existential questions of identity and belonging. As such, it becomes a space for self-examination and an exposure of human fragility in the face of rigid traditions and social expectations.

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Within this framework, confessional literature raises profound critical questions concerning the boundaries of breaking taboos and its role in shaping identity. Is raw disclosure sufficient to dismantle barriers and redefine the self? Can confessional writing reconstruct identity outside pre-established social molds, or does it sometimes risk commodifying individual suffering? Moreover, what critical challenges does this literature face in societies that uphold tradition while constraining personal freedoms?

### ***I. Confessional Literature and the Boundaries of the Self (Concept and Essence)***

Confessional literature emerges from a deeply personal and often painful experience that resists conventional molds, transforming individual suffering into a narrative imbued with universal human significance. While these texts may appear autobiographical on the surface, they transcend personal experience to reshape collective consciousness, intertwining the subjective with the historical and the intimate with the cultural. This literary form maintains a strong connection to the fluid nature of identity, whether individual or collective, as the writer is perceived as a product of ongoing transformations one who cannot be separated from social and cultural contexts.

As one critic notes, The writer, viewed as a process of transformation, cannot be detached from social and cultural specificities, and it is erroneous to isolate a fleeting moment from its broader context. Thus, confessional literature becomes an act of resistance against erasure and marginalization, an attempt to reconstruct a fragmented self that has been shaped by exclusion or oppression. However, this form of writing is not without its conflicts; it faces critical and societal challenges ranging from accusations of sensationalism to skepticism regarding its authenticity, ultimately raising ethical questions about its boundaries and the extent of its boldness.

Confessional literature often referred to as the forbidden art is a narrative form that has sparked considerable debate among critics, leading to three distinct perspectives.

The first perspective, represented by critic MohammedAl-Tanoukhi, defines confessional literature as a branch of autobiographical writing in which the author recounts their life in a narrative form, akin to *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, *The Life Story of Al-Mazni*, or *Diary of a Country Prosecutor* by Tawfiq al-Hakim. According to this view, confession is an honest and emotional self-expression that the author unfolds in their narrative or novel. This approach situates confessional literature within the broader genre of autobiography, akin to memoirs and diaries, where the author translates their private life into a deeply introspective and emotionally charged narrative. From this perspective, confession is a form of self-representation that not only constructs individual identity but also reflects the broader social identity to which the confessing self belongs. This definition remains the most widely accepted and commonly endorsed by literary critics.

Conversely, TehaniAbdelFattahShaker offers a contrasting view, asserting that confessional literature is fundamentally distinct from autobiography. She argues that the confessional writer primarily speaks about their sins and mistakes, distinguishing confessions from autobiography, which encompasses all aspects of a person's life. It is, therefore, inaccurate to classify *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* as an autobiography.

This perspective challenges the traditional classification of confessional literature as a form of self-writing. Rather than viewing it as an extension of autobiography, Shaker emphasizes its thematic core: the act of revealing one's sins, failures, and dark past. Unlike autobiography, which provides a comprehensive portrayal of the self-including both its virtues and flaws confessional literature is marked by a distinctive focus on personal transgressions, setting it apart from memoirs, diaries, and personal narratives.

Supporting this view, BuddyAnbo defines confessional literature as a radical and unfiltered introspection an in-depth self-exploration that fundamentally differs from autobiography, memoirs, letters, diaries, travel writing, and self-reflective narratives. His definition highlights the concept of radical introspection, where the writer engages in deep psychological excavation, exposing the most

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concealed aspects of the self. The term introspection refers to the inward journey of self-examination, while radical implies a complete unveiling and disclosure.

Together, these elements shape a definition of confessional literature as an act of revealing the deepest layers of the self, making it fundamentally distinct from the broader and more comprehensive nature of autobiographical writing.

A third perspective takes a more stylistic and aesthetic approach, focusing on the artistic features that characterize confessional writing. According to DJaberAsfour, Confessional literature is a narrative form closely related to autobiography, typically written in the first person, which unveils the author's inner world yet, always through the masks and mirrors of their characters. This definition situates confessional literature within a liminal space between fiction and autobiography, emphasizing its first-person narration as a means of direct self-expression.

However, Asfour refrains from limiting confessional writing to the revelation of sins or fears; instead, he highlights its introspective depth, where the self is both revealed and obscured through narrative constructs.

These varying perspectives reflect the complexity of confessional literature, revealing its fluid and contested nature. Whether perceived as a branch of autobiography, a space for moral reckoning, or a radical act of self-exposure, this literary form remains an evolving site of negotiation between personal truth and literary craft, challenging the boundaries of authenticity, identity, and social constraints.

### ***II. Confessional Literature and the Boundaries of the Self (Concept and Essence)***

Confessional literature emerges from a deeply personal and often painful experience, rejecting conventional narrative molds to transform individual suffering into a text imbued with universal human significance. While these writings may appear intensely subjective, they transcend individual expression to reshape collective consciousness. In this interplay, the personal intertwines with the historical, the intimate with the cultural. As one critic asserts, there is an intrinsic link between confessional literature and the evolving nature of identity, whether individual or collective.

The writer, perceived as a process of transformation, cannot be detached from their social and cultural context, nor should a fleeting moment be isolated from its broader framework (Abdullah Ibrahim, 2011, p21).

Through this literary mode, writing becomes an act of resistance against erasure and oblivion an attempt to reconstruct a fragmented self, marginalized by oppression or exclusion. Yet, such writing does not escape conflict; it faces critical and social challenges, from accusations of sensationalism to doubts about its authenticity and ethical concerns regarding its audacity and moral boundaries.

Often referred to as the forbidden art, confessional literature remains a contested form of narrative, prompting diverse critical perspectives that can be categorized into three distinct schools of thought.

The first perspective, represented by critic Mohamed Al-Tanoukhi, defines confessional literature as a form of autobiographical writing in which the author narrates their life in a literary fashion. Al-Tanoukhi cites *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, *The Life Story* by Al-Mazini, and *Diary of a Country Prosecutor* by Tawfiq al-Hakim as examples, emphasizing that confession is an authentic emotional expression laid out by the author within their story or novel (Mohammed Al-Tanoukhi. 1999, p109).

This school of thought situates confessional literature within the broader genre of autobiography, akin to memoirs and diaries, wherein the writer translates their personal experiences into a deeply introspective and emotive narrative. According to this view, confession functions as a medium for articulating individual identity, which in turn reflects the broader social identity to which the writer belongs. This interpretation remains the most widely accepted among critics.

Conversely, critic Tehani Abdul Fattah Shakir offers a divergent conceptualization, arguing that confessional literature is fundamentally distinct from autobiography. She asserts, The confessor

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primarily speaks about their sins and transgressions, making this genre different from autobiography, which encompasses all aspects of a person's life. Thus, it is inaccurate to classify *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* as an autobiography (Tehani Shaker. 2002, p30).

In contrast to the first perspective, this view contends that confessional writing is not merely self-narration but is defined by its core theme the revelation of personal guilt, failures, and a troubled past. Unlike autobiography, which presents a holistic account of the self in both its virtues and flaws, confessional literature is uniquely characterized by its focus on personal transgressions and moral reckoning.

This distinction is further reinforced by critic Buddy Anbo, who defines confessional literature as a form of radical introspection, an unfiltered self-examination distinct from autobiography, memoirs, personal letters, diaries, travel literature, and self-reflective fiction (Alquds, site). This definition highlights the concept of radical introspection, which implies a deep psychological excavation of the self. The term unfiltered suggests an uninhibited disclosure, where the author exposes their innermost thoughts without censorship. Unlike autobiography, which tends to offer a comprehensive portrayal of the self, confessional literature is marked by its raw and revelatory nature.

A third perspective adopts a more stylistic and artistic approach to defining confessional literature, emphasizing its narrative techniques and aesthetic qualities. According to critic JaberAsfour, Confessional literature is a narrative form closely related to autobiography, typically written in the first-person voice, through which the concealed depths of the author are unveiled yet always behind masks and mirrors (Gaber Asfour. 1999, p246-247).

Here, Asfour suggests that while confessional writing shares commonalities with autobiography, it operates through a performative lens, wherein the self is both revealed and disguised through the personas constructed within the text. Unlike previous definitions that center on content whether self-revelation or personal guilt this perspective underscores the narrative structure and the artistic mechanisms employed to render the confessional voice compelling.

Ultimately, confessional literature represents an intimate intersection between the author and their text, where personal anxieties, reflections, and experiences are articulated with honesty and transparency. This genre stems from an intrinsic human need for self-expression and self-confrontation, offering a textual space for catharsis.

Within this space, the writer divulges secrets, acknowledges flaws, and recounts moments of vulnerability experiences that individuals often hesitate to disclose in everyday life. Unlike conventional literature, which frequently idealizes its protagonists, confessional literature dismantles this idealized image by presenting a raw, unembellished portrayal of human complexity. Its essence lies in the capacity to dismantle psychological and cultural barriers, exposing the depths of human consciousness, with all its anxieties and shattered dreams.

The study of confessional literature necessitates deconstructing the binary oppositions that define it between disclosure and silence, fiction and truth, scandal and revelation, the personal and the collective. It also requires a deep exploration of how confession functions as a tool for unsettling dominant narratives surrounding the body, identity, power, and belonging.

Confessional literature stands at the threshold of meaning, where the repressed self transforms into a resounding voice, and the text becomes a mirror that reflects not only the contradictions within the self but also the distortions of society. In this sense, it operates as a double-sided mirror one that challenges the present and reshapes the question of identity in defiance of entrenched taboos.

### ***III. The Roots of the Term in Western and Arabic Literature***

#### ***1. In Western Literature***

The concept of confession has been historically linked to the Church and Christian theology, particularly in the Middle Ages and earlier periods. It was known as the Sacrament of Confession or the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance, which involved a sinner acknowledging their transgressions with sincere repentance before a priest, who would then intercede on their behalf to receive divine forgiveness. This practice is referenced in the Holy Bible: If we confess our sins, he is

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faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (The New Testament, ch1, v9), this religious background had a significant influence on Saint Augustine in the fifth century AD. He documented the key moments of his life, confessing his sins and expressing remorse in a highly artistic and eloquent manner. His work, *Confessions*, marked the early presence of confession in literary discourse.

Augustine's *Confessions* is considered one of the earliest autobiographical writings and the first work of confessional literature, belonging to the genre of religious confessions. He begins his text with the words: Here I confess to You my sins, and my tears and anguish bear witness that I am aware of my transgressions and remorseful for them. (Louis Brensom. 1987, p10).

His work was characterized by honesty, self-exposure, and profound introspection, in which he openly admitted to his moral transgressions, indulgences, and misdeeds, detailing his youthful excesses, misconduct with friends and teachers, and even his strained relationship with his mother. Additionally, he revealed his intellectual pursuits, including his engagement with Platonic philosophy, his love for theater, and his belief in astrology. Thus, *Confessions* was not merely an act of confession in the religious sense but rather a fusion of personal memories, reflections, philosophical musings, and theological beliefs. His work later influenced many writers who followed in his footsteps.

This form of writing remained largely absent from the literary scene until the seventeenth century, when the autobiographical genre gained prominence, during this period, there was a growing interest in diaries and memoirs previously marginalized literary forms that flourished alongside the rise of prose, particularly in a socio-cultural landscape marked by significant intellectual transformations. As the Romantic movement emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was an intensified focus on individual subjectivity, leading to an unprecedented proliferation of autobiographies. (Maher Hassan, 2011).

Literature shifted away from imitating universal ideals and fixed values toward exploring personal and individual experiences. Consequently, autobiography became the most effective medium for articulating these subjective encounters, making this era one of the most prolific periods for self-narratives. This evolution in autobiographical writing across its various forms also extended to confessional literature, which was revitalized with the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The emergence of confessional literature in modern times is largely attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was among the first to craft an explicit autobiographical narrative under the title *Confessions* (1782).

In this work, Rousseau chronicled his life with unfiltered honesty, openly acknowledging his sins and mistakes while revealing deeply personal details, including moments of weakness and disgrace. The title itself directly referenced Augustine's *Confessions*, but Rousseau's work diverged from its predecessor by stripping away its religious framework. He also avoided philosophical digressions, focusing instead on his inner self. *Confessions* thus became the first literary work in which the author fully exposes himself, revealing his true nature without embellishment or concealment. In this book, Rousseau meticulously documented every aspect of his life its virtues and vices, its noble and ignoble moments without shying away from confronting the truth. (Helmi Murad, nd, p5), this work revolutionized self-writing by breaking away from traditional autobiographical discourse, which often glorified the self, and instead embracing a narrative centered on confession, self-reproach, and personal reckoning.

Rousseau pioneered this novel literary form, inspiring numerous writers of his time to engage in self-revealing narratives. Among them were Alfred de Musset (*Confessions of a Child of the Century*), Leo Tolstoy (*Confession*), Oscar Wilde, André Gide, and François-René de Chateaubriand, among others. Through their contributions, confessional literature established itself as a significant literary genre with a recognized intellectual and cultural presence in European literary traditions.

### ***2- In Arabic Literature:***

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The emergence of confessional literature in Arabic literature is subtly reflected through Sufi writings, such as Al-Ghazali's *Al-Ihya (The Revival)*, where he blends spiritual experiences with profound self-criticism. Additionally, traces of confessional writing can be found in the letters of Arab writers and poets, who revealed their personal experiences through their works, often confessing to shameful acts that are difficult to speak of. A notable example is Abu Nawas from the Abbasid period, who openly confessed to sins like drinking wine and indulging in relationships with young boys. (Ben Dada Abdel Hakim, 2011, p13).

Before Abu Nawas, the first century of the Islamic calendar witnessed some early attempts at self-writing, which are considered precursors to confessional and autobiographical writing in Arabic literature. These include the confessions of the companion Suleiman Al-Farsi and a considerable number of books where writers celebrated their own lives and personal journeys, such as *The Book of Songs* by Abu Faraj al-Isfahani, and *The Deliverer from Error* by Al-Ghazali, where he explores his spiritual and psychological experiences.

We should also mention *The Eyes of the News in the Class of the Literati*, by Ibn Abi Sabi'a, which includes a collection of confessions from Ibn Sina (Avicenna), where, through his disciple Al-Jurjani, he admits to turning to alcohol when faced with unsolvable problems. Confessional writing is also evident in the letters of classical writers, such as Abu Hayan Al-Tawhidi's *The Friendship and the Friend* and Ibn Hazm's *The Ring of the Dove* (SherifMazour, 2014), where the former reveals truths about his life with boldness and intrigue. Similarly, Ibn Tufail's *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* includes confessions of Sufi practices as the highest level of spiritual knowledge, alongside other works like Al-Ghazali's *Al-Munqidh Min Al-Dalal* and the writings of Osama Ibn Munqidh in his *Kitab Al-I'tibar*. Despite these early instances, confessional literature in the Arab world did not establish itself as a fully developed genre.

It wasn't until the modern era that confessional literature in Arabic gained prominence, as Arab writers began to be influenced by Western confessional works and drew inspiration from their experiences. Early pioneers in the Arab world include Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq in the 19th century with his *Al-Saq 'ala al-Saq* and Taha Hussein in his memoir *Al-Ayyam*, where he discusses his childhood and acknowledges many truths.

Although confessional literature remained rare in the Arab world, notable attempts in contemporary Arabic literature gained recognition from critics. For instance, the Moroccan writer Mohamed Choukri's trilogy, *Al-Khubz al-Hafi*, *Zaman al-Akhata*, and *Wujuh*, showcased an impressive degree of self-revelation, daringly breaking taboos. Likewise, Egyptian writer Louis Awad's *Awraq al-'Umr* contains confessions that his children later removed from circulation after his death, and Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Sijn al-'Umr* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Doctor* also delve into confessional narratives.

Palestinian poet Fadwa Touqan in *A Mountainous Journey...*, a difficult Journey spoke about her life, although she initially stated that she had not revealed everything, considering some of her personal stories too precious to expose, and thus kept parts of her life hidden from prying eyes. Other notable examples include *A Days with Him* by Colette Khoury and *Memoirs of a Woman in Saudi Prisons* by Alia al-Makki.

In Algeria, several writers and novelists have ventured into the confessional genre with honesty. Works such as *Confessions of a Woman* by Aicha Ben Nour, *The Gate of Memories* by Assia Djebar, which unveiled many personal secrets, and *Rebellious* by Malika Mhammed, exemplify this trend. However, despite these efforts, confessional literature in the Arab world remains relatively underdeveloped and narrow in scope. This limitation is due to several social, political, and cultural constraints, including a mentality of rejection and prohibition, tribal customs, religious and political restrictions, and the fact that many Arab writers aim to portray themselves as free from faults, which contradicts the core of confessional literature that requires courage, patience, and an honest exposure of personal flaws. (Fadwa Touqan, 1985, p10).

### ***IV. The Artistic Features of Confessional Literature***

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Confessional literature is distinguished by several characteristics that make it a genre in its own right. Some of the most prominent features include:

### **1. Subjectivity:**

The confessional text revolves around the author's personal experience, placing the self at the center of the narrative event. As Rousseau stated in his *Confessions*, I am embarking on a project that has never been attempted before, nor will it ever be repeated, as I aim to present to my peers a person in the truest image of his nature, this person being myself, (Helmi Murad, nd, p5).

The author is the narrator, the protagonist, and the witness all at once, with the event unfolded through their personal, highly individualized perspective.

### **2. Truthfulness and Boldness:**

Confessional literature breaks psychological and social barriers, with the author revealing their secrets and the details of their private life, regardless of how embarrassing or painful they might be. The more the author reveals about their life, its events, and their experiences without concealing or hiding any of their truths, the more valuable their self-translated narrative becomes. If the truths are obscured or misleading, the value of the narrative diminishes. (ShawqiDaif, n.d, p214).

Confessions are not merely about showcasing the self but are an open confrontation with flaws and mistakes, adding a purifying dimension to the text.

### **3. Internal Dialogical Structure:**

Confessional texts are built upon an ongoing internal dialogue between the author and their own self. This dialogue re-evaluates the past and reflects on the present, making the text resemble a psychological journey that explores dimensions of personal identity and human suffering.

### **4. Intersection of Narrative and Reflection:**

This literary genre is marked by a blend of narrative storytelling with philosophical and psychological reflections. This fusion results in texts that transcend traditional autobiographies, becoming deeply introspective works that seek answers to existential questions concerning the self, the other, and time.

### **V. Breaking Taboos in Confessional Literature**

Breaking taboos is a fundamental aspect of confessional literature. This genre emerges from a liberating tendency aimed at dismantling the constraints placed on the self, delving into topics that are typically taboo (morally, religiously, or politically). (Mohammed Al-Amin Bahri, p3).

The essence of confessional literature lies in challenging societal norms and exposing the unspoken by addressing sensitive topics related to personal identity and psychological conflicts, without resorting to any embellishment or distortion of reality. In this genre, the author does not aim to beautify the self or present it in an idealized form that aligns with societal expectations. Rather, they aim to uncover the darker, more marginal aspects of their personal experience. This requires direct confrontation with taboos surrounding human behavior, such as sexuality, religion, death, the body, authority, and politics issues often viewed as forbidden and should remain silent, for silence is a deliberate or ethical choice regarding the unspoken, a form of protection from the dangers of speaking out. (Fathi Al-Maskini, 2016, p340).

However, confessional literature, with its inherently revolutionary nature, defies these boundaries, challenging and deconstructing taboos through a confrontation with the self's experiences and errors. It reshapes the relationship with the external world according to a more realistic and honest vision.

Breaking taboos in confessional literature is not simply a rebellion against traditional norms and values; it is an attempt to reshape human consciousness by confronting both the self and society with truths that may be painful or embarrassing, yet represent an integral part of the human experience. In this context, the writer does not seek to shock the reader but aims for an internal liberation that restores the humanity of the self and grants the ability to transcend the psychological and social constraints that hinder a deeper understanding of human existence. Thus, breaking taboos

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in confessional literature is a revolutionary act that contributes to dismantling societal illusions and opens the space for an honest and direct dialogue with the self and the other.

### **VI. Building Identity Through Confessional Literature**

Confessional literature creates a unique literary space that allows the author to embark on a journey of self-exploration and the reformation of identity through life experiences and profound personal confessions. Identity, as a dynamic and evolving construct, is not solely shaped by pre-existing affiliations or stereotypes imposed by society. It emerges from the continuous interaction between the self and the other, the past and the present, and the individual experience and the broader cultural context. Confessional literature manifests as a form of discourse that provides the writer with a rare opportunity to express these internal tensions and reclaim their voice in the face of external pressures that attempt to mold them into fixed collective identities. As one scholar notes, Few people have the courage to speak the truth about their sexual lives...

On the other hand, how can an autobiographer tell the truth about such topics when writing as an artist, when, like all artists, they need release? To create any story of real release, the writer must be given the opportunity to build a world that aligns more with their desires than their real life, and to forget that world, they must create it... (André Maurois. n.d, p103-104)

In confessional literature, the writer can surpass the rigid frameworks imposed on identity whether sexual, racial, religious, or cultural and begin to construct a narrative identity that is shaped through continuous confessions. The writer acknowledges their personal experience, not as an isolated individual experience, but as a model representing the struggles of modern humanity in its search for meaning and existence. In this sense, confessional literature becomes a tool for negotiating with the self, as the writer engages in an internal dialogue that enables them to redefine their identity in a more truthful and profound manner.

The construction of identity in confessional literature is closely tied to the idea of shedding the false masks imposed by society and seeking the true self behind these façades. The writer in this literary form does not aim to present an idealized image of themselves but confesses their flaws, mistakes, and shortcomings. They reveal their internal struggles and psychological contradictions that contribute to shaping their human identity. Through this frank confession, the writer frees themselves from the identities imposed upon them and builds a renewed identity that aligns with their personal experience and unique worldview.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, confessional literature plays a crucial role in challenging societal taboos related to identity and difference by presenting narratives that embrace racial, sexual, or cultural diversity. It advocates for individuals' right to exist as they are, without conforming to restrictive social norms. Acknowledging marginalized or non-conventional identities serves as a direct challenge to dominant perceptions of collective identity, contributing to a broader understanding of human individuality beyond reductive classifications.

The construction of identity through confessional literature is both a process of self-liberation and narrative redefinition. The writer reshapes their sense of self by confronting their past, revealing inner conflicts, and engaging with the other. In this context, identity is not a fixed or predetermined construct but an evolving narrative that continuously redefines the self through truth-telling, deconstructing stereotypes, and striving for a deeper understanding of human.

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