GENDERED AUTOBIOGRAPHY: “RECORD” AND “INQUIRY”

A Comparative Reading of the Memoirs of Edward Said and Jean Said Makdisi

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This paper attempts to present a comparative feminist reading, informed by autobiography theory, of the memoirs of brother and sister, Edward W. Said and Jean Said Makdisi. The choice, here, of the two texts, Edward Said’s *Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999) and Jean Said Makdisi’s *Teta, Mother and Me: An Arab Woman’s Memoir* (2005), reflects several theoretical concerns, and attempts to explore the different motives behind writing a memoir, and consequently, the choice of self-representation, in the light of theories of autobiography. This paper, therefore, attempts answering the following questions: How different are the driving forces which motivated both Edward Said and Jean Said Makdisi to write their memoirs? What are their perceptions regarding the “uses of autobiography”?

What is the power these memoirs carry in the socio-political context?

It is worth noting, at the outset, that my reading is directed by several theoretical assumptions: autobiography as a form of self-representation is gendered, and there are, consequently, marked differences between men’s and women’s writing, not based on an essentialist notion of masculinity and femininity, but as a reflection of experiential variation; autobiography writing is a process of self-representation, and should not, therefore, be read and judged according to its “referentiality”; and the process of writing involves the existence of an implicit readership, and hence, involves a “political dimension.” Thus, methodologically, this paper follows a feminist approach, comparing the memoirs of brother and sister, as a case in point, to clarify that the most critical element in auto/bio/graphy is not the “bio” or life, but actually the process of writing (“graphy”), as mediated by the author.
This paper is, therefore, divided into three parts. In the first part, I wish to begin by referring to two key concepts governing my reading of the memoirs; namely, the difference between women’s autobiographical writing and mainstream men’s autobiography; as well as the epistemological specificity of “memoir” within autobiography theory. In the second part I will explore the two texts in terms of motivation, and will then consider Edward Said’s and Jean Said Makdisi’s perceptions of the power of writing and self-representation. The third part of the paper will include reflections on the two texts in the light of the notion of “uses of autobiography”.

Gendered Memoirs:

In her study of women’s autobiographies, Estelle Jelinek has paved the path for the rise of feminist autobiography theory. In her ground-breaking article, “Women’s Autobiography and the Male Tradition,” she offers a paradigm differentiating autobiographies written by men from those written by women. In her discussion of “the male tradition,” she relies on the criteria specified in traditional autobiography criticism; while her own reading of women’s autobiographies informs her contribution as to the features characterizing the women’s tradition of autobiography.\(^5\)

In her comparative gender-oriented study of autobiography, “Women’s Autobiography and the Male Tradition,” Jelinek maintains that men’s autobiographies differ from those written by women, as summarized in the following features of both content and form. First, autobiography (i.e., male autobiography) focuses on the author’s position in the public sphere, his career and life in the wider socio-political and historical context, and is “representative of his times, a mirror of his era” (7). Second, men tend to write autobiographies which “may exaggerate, mythologize, or monumentalize their boyhood and their entire lives” (14); they also portray “their lives as heroic,” and tend to represent themselves in “a self-image of confidence” (15). Third, in terms of form, autobiography critics contend that (male) autobiographers follow a
chronological narrative structure, “concentrating on one period of their life, one theme, or one characteristic of their personality” with the intention to “consciously shape their life into a coherent whole” (17).

On the contrary, in her reading of women’s autobiographies, Jelinek argues, first, that the focus is on the personal and private aspects of the autobiographer’s life, particularly in relation to other people in her life, highlighting “domestic details, family difficulties, close friends, and especially people who influenced them” (8). Second, women’s autobiographical self-images reveal their “self-consciousness and need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding,” motivated by their desire “to clarify, to affirm, and to authenticate their self-image” (15). Thus, women’s autobiographies can be seen as a means for self-expression, seeking recognition and acknowledgement rather than grandeur. Third, women’s autobiographical accounts are marked by “irregularity” and instead of following a linear structure, are usually “disconnected, fragmentary, or organized into self-sustained units” (17).

In her landmark book, *The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography* (1986), while not claiming to offer a “feminist history” of autobiography, Jelinek focuses on the “literary characteristics of the autobiographies” in terms of “content”, “narrative forms,” and “self-image” (*Tradition* xi). She traces the development of autobiography in the West in the following lines:

> It is only since World War II that autobiography has been considered a legitimate genre worthy of formal study. Before then, autobiographies were considered of interest almost exclusively for the information they provided about the *lives* of their authors … Most criticism concentrated on British and Continental autobiographies of *famous men* whose private lives were a source of curiosity. (Jelinek, *Tradition* 1, emphasis added)
Although these lines imply the rise of new trends in autobiography criticism since the middle of the twentieth century, Jelinek exposes both genre and gender limitations. Traditional autobiography writing was concerned with revealing the “private lives” of “famous men”; and similarly, mainstream critical attention was directed towards the “lives” of those “men.” This quotation, hence, raises two problematic issues; namely, the focus on the presentation rather than the representation of the self, and the predominant marginalization of women in critical inquiries. A considerable amount of research has been carried out in the past few decades, revising traditional notions of male authority and authorship, as well as redressing the processes of silencing and absenting women.

It is also worth pointing out in this context that the focus of feminist autobiography theory is generic as well as gender-oriented. In their Introduction to *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography*, Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck highlight this connection, stating that “Autobiography localizes the very program of much feminist theory – the reclaiming of the female subject – even as it foregrounds the central issue of contemporary critical thought – the problematic status of the self” (1-2). Thus, the “self” becomes the agent of biographical representation. Yet, identity theory (which does not come full-force within the scope of this paper) views autobiography “as a site of identity production” (Gilmore 14), and Betty Bergland further problematises the autobiographical self by seeing her/him “as socially and historically constructed and multiply positioned in complex worlds and discourses” (Bergland 131), and sets a paradigm of the multiple shifting positions of the author as person, narrator and character (143).

In his widely-cited article “Autobiography and Historical Consciousness,” Karl J. Weintraub argues that autobiography emerged as a distinct genre with the development of a historical sense. Regarding the term “autobiography” etymologically, Weintraub defines all autobiographical writing in terms of the “inward absorption and reflection” on external reality as
mediated through personal experience. Moreover, stating that the differentiation of memoir from autobiography cannot be “a tight and definitive one,” he points out that the memoirist “records the memories of significant happenings,” with emphasis on momentous events rather than personal characteristics (822-823). A memoir is further distinguished from a diary which “attributes prime significance to the segments of life” (827).

Unlike Weintraub, whose definitions of various forms of autobiographical writing are conditioned by the content itself, Margo Culley considers memoirs, foremost, as narrative forms; and thus distinguishes them from fictional narratives, as well as from other forms of autobiographical writing such as diaries and letters. She argues that the difference is marked mainly by the temporal point of writing, as memoirs are written at a fixed moment in the present during which the memoirist reflects on the past. Weintraub focuses on the temporal and spatial point of view, and seems to consider the choice of the moment of writing in terms of its significance in the memoirist’s life, and the power of “retrospective interpretation” in making the past “intelligible and meaningful in terms of the present understanding” (826). Culley, on the other hand, stresses the temporal perspective, in the sense of its proximity and distance from the events remembered and recorded. Thus, she is more concerned with the machinations of consciousness, and the process of “selecting details to create a persona” (12). I wish to argue, however, that the most significant aspect of the term “memoir” lies in the fact that it implies foregrounding the process of memory in self-representation, and consequently highlights the conscious and subconscious acts of recollection, interpretation and selection. It is interesting, therefore, in reading memoirs, to pursue the moments in the memoirist’s life that direct her/him from the present to the past and then back again, in terms of reflection and expression.
Memoir as “record”

In this part of the paper I wish to explore the critical moment in the life of Edward Said which directed him towards introspection and self-inscription. I intend to focus here on the incident in Edward Said’s life which triggered his decision to write his memoir. In his case, the decision led to immediate involvement in the project, which started in 1994, and ended with the publication of the memoir in 1999. Edward Said’s Preface to *Out of Place* opens with the following statement, “*Out of Place is a record* of an essentially lost or forgotten world. Several years ago I received what seemed to be a fatal medical diagnosis, and it therefore struck me as important to leave behind a subjective account of the life I lived” (emphasis added, xi).

These lines connect memoir-writing to death, in the sense of Said’s attempt at resisting death through writing about his life. To him, the act of writing is an act of capturing life, and leaving behind an “account” of his educational upbringing. The gradual deterioration of his health is counter balanced by his desire to reproduce his life, and the parallelism between intellectual “construction” and physical “degeneration” is most eloquently described in the following:

> These details are important as a way of explaining to myself and to my reader how the time of this book is intimately tied to the time, phases, ups and downs, variations in my illness. As I grew weaker, the numbers of infections and bouts of side effects increased, the more this book was my way of constructing something in prose while in my physical and emotional life I grappled with anxieties and pains of degeneration. Both tasks resolved themselves into details: to write is to get from word to word, to suffer illness is to go through the infinitesimal steps that take you through from one state to another. (216)
In addition to highlighting the power of the memoir in resisting death on a personal level, these lines are significant as they reveal Edward Said’s conscious decision to write, not only for himself, but for his readers as well. He is trying to “explain” to himself and his “reader” the connection between his book and his illness. However, reading *Out of Place*, we hardly encounter this process of explanation “to himself,” as Edward Said’s tone throughout the memoir is mostly confident, self-assertive and powerful. The memoir does not reflect his attempts at understanding and explaining his life, as much as offering “a subjective account,” “translating experiences,” collected and organized in his memoir, which he describes as having “some validity as an unofficial personal record” (xiii). Indeed, being an academic and intellectual, Said believes in the power of words; therefore, instead of potentially leaving his life in the hands of future biographers, he takes the initiative and power of self-representation in his own hands.

Edward Said is conscious of the process of construction taking place in his writing. He states in his Preface that the definite reason behind writing his memoir is his need to connect his past to his present, in the act of “reconstructing a remote time and experience” (xiv), by collecting fragments of his “history and origins” with the purpose of attempting “to construct them into order” (6). Like most mainstream autobiographies, Edward Said’s text does not include moments of questioning, confusion, or discovery; nor does it reveal the process of grappling with memories, sources, photos and other elements of the past as part of this construction. To Said, the written text does not expose the memoirist’s struggle with his memory, nor his acknowledgement of its limitations, but is more celebratory, presenting his final statement and effort “to record the experiences as a coherent whole” (65). In addition to confirming the mainstream notion of “male autobiography” as seeking to present a life in a unifying and “coherent whole” (as mentioned in the previous part of this paper), Said’s description of his own work, here, is also reminiscent of James Olney’s notion of autobiography as “metaphor of the self,” and hence could suggest to us
viewing Edward Said’s final construct as acquiring monumental dimensions: a self-designed memorial – the memoir of an intellectual exile.

Memoir as “inquiry”

Unlike Edward Said, Jean Said Makdisi refers to the prolonged duration of time separating her decision to write and the actual moment of action. *Teta, Mother and Me* marks a journey of twists and turns, not only in content, but in the actual conceptualization of the book. Similar to Edward Said, Jean Said Makdisi’s initial impulse to write is triggered by imminent death, with the significant difference that in her case, the threat presented itself to her in her maternal grandmother’s gradual “mental oblivion” and her mother’s widowhood and growing sense of “emptiness.” Despite being in her prime, Jean Said Makdisi manifests her identification with her mother and grandmother, and her fear from the “inevitable marginality” imposed on women, across generations, by oppressive “domestic duties” (10). At the same time, in her insightful article “Teta, Mother and I,” she expresses her intention to trace the lives of her grandmother, mother, sisters and herself in “a biographical act of love” (25). Yet the idea which started as a “biography” soon moves into the realm of historical research, leading Jean Said Makdisi to an awareness that the “world of women … the domestic life, with all its mysteries and rituals, could not be separated from the outer life, the world of politics and armies and treaties” (28). She concludes the same article stating her aim in the following: “I wish to pay homage to their legacy even while breaking loose from it’” (52).

Jean Said Makdisi opens her memoir, *Teta, Mother and Me*, with a Prelude, which refers to the immensity of her undertaking, and shares with us her illusions, expectations and intentions. As we read, it becomes clear that the process of producing the memoir had gone through various stages, and lived within Jean Said Makdisi for several years – not the months she had anticipated:
When I started to write this book, I thought that mine would be an easy task. Glibly, I told my friends I would be done in three months – six, maximum. I was going to write a loving double biography of my mother and grandmother from the vantage point of my own unsettling experiences as a modern Arab woman. The book, I thought, might take fictional or semi-fictional form, and would be, somehow, like a musical offering, a song of memory and sadness. That is all…

I had no idea when I began that in tracing my female ancestry I was entering the cage of history. (9)

These lines mention the long process of writing the book – a process which is triggered by her grandmother’s health deterioration, leading to her death in 1973; then the urgency of writing gains force again following her mother’s death (11). However, the idea remains on hold, as Jean Said Makdisi finds herself caught up in her everyday life experience before and during the war in Lebanon. This encounter with military-imposed death has pushed her to write an earlier memoir, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (1990), after which she embarks on *Teta, Mother and Me*.

Apart from the struggle to begin writing, the previous quotation points out the process of conceptualization involved in the realization of her project. Jean Said Makdisi engages us in her initial ideas and tentative decisions as to the genre and form of writing. It becomes clear that her initial impulse was not one of writing an autobiography, but “a loving double biography” of both her mother and grandmother. Thus, she reveals her wish to express gratitude towards these two women, as well as to assert her connection to a female family history and tradition. Intending it as a “fictional or semi-fictional” narrative, the memoirist finds herself grappling with history, with all its facts and fictions; thus, writing the memoir becomes to her a process of research, interpretation and representation. The memoir, however, begins to take concrete shape to Jean
Said Makdisi when her own feminine experience merges with that of her mother and grandmother.

Read in the light of women’s autobiography theory, Jean Said Makdisi’s connection to her mother and grandmother, as reflected in the very act of memoir-writing, is marked by what Mary Mason describes in terms of the “recognition of another consciousness … the grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other” (22). Thus, having relied on her own memories, her mother’s journal, family letters and photographs, as well as historical facts and documents, the memoirist expresses her ultimate sense of cross-generational continuity: “And once I saw how I was related to both, I began to write this book. We have become a family of storytellers and record-keepers” (18). However, Jean Said Makdisi is aware of the process of writing as different from the experience of living. In her memoir, she gives voice to her mother by quoting her journal extensively, and emphasizing the fact that reflection on life experience is a discovery, while the reconstruction of the past is a rediscovery (247-248).

Jean Said Makdisi, refers subtly to the power of self-representation. By urging her mother to write a journal, by reading both official and unofficial historical documents, by tracing her grandmother’s life, by stressing the cross-generational continuum, and by committing herself to the memoir, the memoirist demonstrates her awareness of the importance of personal accounts in relation to history. In her attempt to resist the imposed marginality on women, and in her effort to give voice to her mother and grandmother, Jean Said Makdisi, retrieves them from invisibility. Thus, Teta, Mother and Me emerges as a feminist text: it places women center stage; it reflects women’s bondage and shared experiences; it gives women voice and retrieves them from oblivion; it highlights women’s agency by revealing their hidden roles in society, and through self-representation.
Generically speaking, the text is not a typical autobiography, as it is composed of a variety of intersecting narrative forms, most prominent of which are autobiography, biography and history:

This book began steeped in a felt reality, as a direct *inquiry* into my mother’s, my grandmother’s and my own womanhood… I was a young mother when I began to think about this project; I am now a Teta to a new generation.

As I read and worked, I arrived at a complex re-reading of the condition of women, not a simplifying one. (emphasis added, 397)

Being a feminist herself, Jean Said Makdisi perceives of the memoir in terms of a process of reading and re-reading – exploration and interpretation. It is the manifestation of a feminist “inquiry” into the experience of womanhood across three generations; and by telling the stories of her mother’s and grandmother’s lives, Jean Said Makdisi inscribes her own life-story within women’s history. Thus, the “Arab Woman” who appears in the subtitle, qualifying the “Memoir,” can be seen as referring to Jean, Mother and Teta, each independently in her own right, or as representatives of their contemporary Arab women.

Reflections on the Use of Memoirs

The history of autobiography criticism proves that autobiography has always occupied an ambiguous position in relation to history, philosophy, psychology and fiction. In his study, *The Forms of Autobiography* (1980), William C. Spengemann states that autobiographical content manifests itself in several forms: “Historical self-explanation, philosophical self-scrutiny, poetic self-expression, and poetic self-invention” (xvi). In the more recent context of theoretical inquiry, autobiography does not simply permeate (as envisioned by earlier autobiography historians), but “explodes disciplinary boundaries and requires an understanding of other approaches, methods
Trev Broughton goes as far as stating that autobiography is to her “a resource for feminist enquiry, as a tool for feminist pedagogy, and an engine of feminist change” (244). In her exploration of “the uses of autobiography,” Julia Swindells explains the ways in which autobiography contributes to various disciplines, such as empirical history, cultural history, anthropology, education, law, psychoanalysis, theatre and women’s studies; and calls for activating autobiography for political empowerment and social change (9-11).

Reflecting on the memoirs of Edward Said and Jean Said Makdisi, I can recognize the memoirists’ intellectual awareness of the power of autobiographical texts. In the case of Edward Said, *Out of Place* emerges as a revelation of intellectual development, a celebration of achievements in the face of challenging circumstances of upbringing, education and political reality. Yet, it goes, furthermore, hand in hand with Said’s life-long mission and intellectual role, rooted in his personal Palestinian experience, in exposing colonial exploitation and imperialist domination in the East/West encounters. Nadia Gindi concludes her article “On the Margins of a Memoir” stating that “Edward Said has found a ‘homeland’ in the act of writing” (298) – a statement confirmed and further elaborated by Edward Said himself in his article on “The Public Roles of Writers and Intellectuals” where he, in turn, concludes “with the thought that the intellectual’s provisional home is the domain of an exigent, resistant, intransigent art” (144). Thus, *Out of Place*, in my mind, takes a form of autobiography, yet transcends the boundaries of traditional self-assertion and heroism. It carries the weight of a historical document, the power of self-representation, as well as the authority of cultural studies, post-colonial research, exile and identity theory.

Jean Said Makdisi’s memoir, similarly, invites more than interest in a woman’s family chronicle. It presents and represents the intertwined life-stories of three generations of women; retrieving Teta and Mother from oblivion, highlighting the sense of continuity as to women’s
predicament imposed by the burden of femininity across history and geography, critiquing modernity, and asserting women’s agency. Structurally speaking, *Teta, Mother and Me* reflects its content: fragments of life-stories, historical accounts, changing politics and geographies, multiple voices coming together – though far from aspiring to a unifying “coherent whole.” The forte of Jean Said Makdisi’s memoir lies in its power as a woman’s narrative that delves into the past and inquires the present. It is, moreover, a feminist document that rereads and rewrites the history of women; and counters the misrepresentation and stereotyping of Arab women – an effort particularly significant in the present historical moment.13 *Teta, Mother and Me* is a celebration of, and testament to, women’s invisible contribution to history. Apart from its momentous content, the text generically merges autobiography, biography, history, and fiction, in addition to its potential for further consideration and scholarship in cultural and women’s studies.

Both Edward Said and Jean Said Makdisi write their memoirs addressing a readership. By choosing to write their own stories, instead of leaving the initiative in the hands of future biographers, they implicitly acknowledge the pitfalls of misrepresentation, and take the power of self-representation in their own hands: Edward Said presenting his life within the contemporary history of the Middle East; Jean Said Makdisi contributing to women’s autobiography and history. Reading their memoirs, in juxtaposition, concretizes the gendered aspect of autobiography, while looking at their memoirs from a distance – both emerge as honest intellectuals standing up to their public roles.
Notes


2. In her article, entitled “Creating a Tradition,” Françoise Lionnet argues against reading autobiography in terms of its truth value, and states that “To raise the question of referentiality and ask whether the text points to an individual existence beyond the pages of the book is to distort the picture” (91).

3. In her “Conclusion: Autobiography and the Politics of ‘The Personal,’” Julia Swindells uses the “political dimension” of autobiography in relation to the idea that autobiography often carries an oppositional or radical message (205).

4. In her comparative book review of *Out Of Place* and *Teta, Mother and Me*, among others, Fayza Hassan poses the question: “Can the memory of the same events, shared by two siblings, really be so different”?


6. Jelinek traces the content of several prominent women’s autobiographies, including pioneering feminist activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as well as novelists and writers such as Gertrude Stein and Edith Wharton among others. She reaches the conclusion that even women who have played a significant role in the public sphere, tend to refer humorously and “obliquely to their careers” (“Women’s Autobiography” 8-10).

7. Memory Theory highlights the workings of memory in terms of the conscious and subconscious processes, such as remembering, forgetting, and transforming events of the past, on both the


9 James Olney argues that autobiography marks man’s desire to impose order, and consequently takes various generic manifestations.


11 In their Introduction to *Feminism and Autobiography*, the editors are particularly concerned with autobiography in relation to Women’s Studies and the feminist project.

12 The political power entailed in *Out of Place* is heightened by the hostile reactions to Said’s account. In her “personal reading” of Said’s memoir, Nadia Gindi exposes the mendacity of the attacks launched against Said.

13 In an interview with Jean Said Makdisi, published in the *Daily Star*, Samia Nassar Melki highlights Makdisi’s contribution in “reclaiming the past” of Arab women, and states: “For indeed Makdisi’s book is not just about reminiscences, but a social study carefully charting the quality of life of the women who came before her.”

**Works Cited**


