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**Narrating the Self: Negotiating the Traumatic Past in Zainab Salbi's Memoir,
*Between Two Worlds-Escape from Tyranny: Growing up in the Shadow of
Saddam***

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Abstract:

The article presents a coherent rendering of the relations between individual trauma and cultural understanding using Zainab Salibi's memoir as the focus to comprehend the understanding of the gulf war. The article deliberates on the narrative construction of identity, and memory. It is an attempt to evince how the memoir is not a simple reconstruction of the historical past or a subjective recollection but it is the very evocation of historicity of Iraq in an entirely new dimension. The analysis reveals how her memoir is itself, a telling and remembering stories heard and incidents seen. The focus is to enunciate how her telling is all about recalling, iterating, reading, and questioning the social and ethical international relations of the state and how such an attempt makes the act of remembering not a mere neutral representation but treats it as a set of claims that are determined and well reasoned

Keywords: identity, memory, culture, ethnicity, Self narrative, nation.

The article is about the narrative construction of identity, and memory. It is an attempt to evince how the memoir is not a simple reconstruction of the historical past or a subjective recollection but it is the very evocation of historicity of Iraq in an entirely new dimension. The endeavor is to present a coherent rendering of the relations between individual trauma and cultural understanding using Zainab Salbi's memoir *Between Two Worlds-Escape from Tyranny Growing up in the Shadow of Saddam* as the focus to comprehend the understanding of the gulf

war. The memoir can be read as both an ideological and a discursive shift that engenders new construction of identity in relation to self and nation. Caught between two cultures her narrative creates a temporal frame work that transcends the individual life span, relating her recollections about her parents and the sufferers caught in the conflict.

Her telling is all about recalling, iterating, reading, and questioning the social and ethical international relations of the state. Such an attempt makes the act of remembering not a mere neutral representation but treats it as a set of claims that are determined and well reasoned. Memory's capacity is limited by neural and cultural constraints such as focus and bias. Recollections can be restricted by psychological pressures and hence poignant memoirs are suppressed, maybe over written, or effaced. Her telling at times over writes incidents that remains with her perpetually. Zainab Salbi was born and brought up in Iraq spent her childhood weekends at a farmhouse on Saddam's Hussein's compound. Her memories are a blend of happy and disturbing ones, while she recalls Saddam's dancing, laughing, cooking, fishing and wearing funny hats she also talks of oppression, public executions and rape. She describes from her experience and also from valid details that she had listened to about Saddam. Her act of telling is in the mode of understanding oneself, the understanding unravels how dominant discourses can create new meanings and new identities of the self. Her purpose to vocalize is felt because she feels the need to "take ownership of my voice, my truth, and my story" (Salbi 290)

The telling of the story largely depends on the narrative significance which makes it unbeaten. A mere glance at the narrative prompts one to distinguish the heterodiegetic or homodiegetic mode that the teller adopts. Self narrative infuses a complexity because many a times the self can become an ambiguous entity. Salbi is striven to fiercely express the self and the community through her work, similar to what Paul Eakin, says "the self at the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily fictive" (qtd. Anzte 21) she is at once the producer of the text and the receiver because as "Issues of memory are everywhere today" (Anzte 21) Her text is different from a written text because her story is more in the form of narrative memory and so we see breaks, endings, and decisive moments of closure.

The memoir is formed out of the stories she hears from her grandmother, her mother and her father. The story gives space to different story tellers notably the stories told by her librated mother and her traditional grandmother. Salbi mentions "there are four recurring themes in my

life... women, men, war, family and religion” (20) she learns about them through observation and listening. Her mother’s contempt for Saddam, her revulsions toward Saddam’s autocratic ways and Saddam’s extravagant parties explained his misuse of power and outrageous conduct which went unquestioned. She takes into account details from her mother’s journal entries. Her mother’s account of Saddam shows how ideologically he was on the offensive. Salbi cannot reconcile her father’s passive acceptance to be Saddam’s pilot, finds it hard to face the arrogance of Saddam, his wife and children in the name of socializing. “Control of Iraq through his nationalistic Pan -Arab Baath Party”. (33)

Salbi who is caught between two nations and two cultures, Iraq where she has been born and where she has lived till her teens and America where she relocates to embrace a new identity and culture. Caught between two cultures she enters the contested arena of identity formation in the post modern world. The narrative subtly invokes how contemporary discourses emphasize post ethnicity which serves to ease out the role of ‘ethnic identity.’ As an immigrant Salbi is connected to more than one nation and culture. Which demonstrates the space of in between that post modern era generates. Salbi locates herself in the in-between foreign space to tell how such an identity was inevitable to escape the tyranny of Saddam. Homeland becomes a site of contest and conflict; under such circumstances she sees herself as the guardian of truth and advances her story as a corrective measure to misleading interpretations of the Iraq conflict. The distress is culture specific so there is a need to understand the locale its meaning and usage.

Her memoir is itself a telling and remembering stories heard and incidents seen. Hence she is obligated to raise an ‘autonomous’ act of protest mirroring the atrocity of Saddam in Iraq and the heroic autonomy of the survivors. Understanding the position of the self in relation to nation, family, victims and survivors result in shared experience despite differences which in turn forces some sort of meaning making. Paul Ricouer in his book *Oneself As Another* 1992, argues that we know ourselves as distinct from others only then a process he calls ‘emplotment’ occurs, (meaning, an unending weaving and reweaving series of historical events into a narrative with a plot.). We see how the narrative frames the past and present events, the motives and actions of character to understand the self and hence mediates between poles of ‘self hood’ and ‘self constancy’. Her narrative if distinguished as an operation of self observation then what she imagines is self- surveillance “Memory like belief ... is an action ;essentially; it is the action of

telling a story.." (Antze, 124) If theories assume that memories are time bound and follow sequential model this model provides a temporal structure for her memoir; individual recollection collates to insert into larger narrative. At times her telling reveals the way she reacts rather than recollect which can be read as symptoms of repressed memories. Her narrative is objective and subjective this simultaneously gives her memoir a discursive power; it is more inter-subjective and dialogical than exclusively individual. This strategy makes her question the social & ethical policy of the state. It makes the task of remembering not a mere neutral representation but treats it as a set of claims that are determined and well reasoned.

She strives to anchor selfhood in a personal and social history of the nation. Her story locates the self within a shared social history that is constructed. Her telling mirrors the political patriarchal dominance of power in the very form of textual disclosure and language within which she couches her story. Saddam's hegemonic conduct is evidenced on how he built the Iraqi identity by wiping away the trace of another ethnic community (the Kurdish, Iranian ethnic group) resistance to such atrocity was thoroughly curbed, seeds of revulsions over matters of identity and nation was evidently silenced and abused by Saddam's dictatorial regime.

Salbi's family experiences a sense of isolation, and is a passive witness to Saddam's moral outrage, his imposition of social policies which excludes the Iranians. Kali Tall observes instructive similarities between Saddam and Hitler as both were bent on supporting fascist policy. Her story itself is a story about narrative memory and identity. What kind of expressive possibilities does it open? What does it foreclose? Questions of this sort are approached through personal narratives which can be highly revealing when it attempts to translate ideas into experiential realities. She knew Saddam as a relative and as the president of Iraq. She came from a good stock her father a pilot for Saddam. Her father was the son of a prominent minister of education who had suffered censure for being frank about his political views. Her mother an Iranian kept herself busy with appointments and social obligations. Her parents descended from business class, she enjoyed the privileges of the upper class in Baghdad, as she says culturally she was as Western as Middle Eastern.

The western media gave credit to Saddam for liberating women as women were free to work and no restriction was imposed on dress and manner but The inside story of Saddam as a heavy drinker, womanizer, an autocrat, a strong man energy equal to 10 men makes the reader

aware of Saddam's personal details which media or historians may fail to narrate. Experiences her mother narrates give authenticity to Saddam's flaws and barbarism. Most Iraqi's joined the Bath party either for fear or for blind hero worship. Salbi feels liberated when she is out of Iraq her mother forces her to leave Iraq for she feared that she might be a victim for Saddam's sensual desire. This disclosure by the mother was shocking for she was taught to call him 'Amo Saddam' meaning uncle and so did all children.

The man who seemed 'respectful' on T.V. 'when camera followed' could desire a girl who was his daughter's age is not chronicled in any historical or media report which only listed his assets, his political and social life style. She takes the bold stance to unravel facts about Saddam. Such candidness she admits was built on what her mother had hammered into her, the need to be tough and independent. Michael Lambek opines "Memory is something we all know intimately. It is a central and an unambiguous part of our commonsense world. Its presence is indisputable if unsteady as the weather" (xi) If memory is a text which provides information then there is a possibility that it is objective because memories are based on experience. Memory is discursive and it is seen in the way she tries to forget the harsh realities of Iraq but in forgetting she remembers the trauma of struggle for an identity in her homeland as well as in the settlers land. It goes to evince how the task of Remembering is the chore of the gaze and the entity it generates. Her telling mirrors the dynamics of power, which went to build the Iraqi's identity by wiping away the trace of another ethnic group. Matters of identity and nation were evidently curbed by Saddam's troop. In recounting she centers herself as a victim and an agent in the telling of their lives. The narrative locates the self within a shared social history that is constructed and driven by a continuing tension, so in the telling there is a subtle questioning of the events, decisions, and servility of the subjects who feared resistance against the tyranny of Saddam. .

Memory is anything but a photographic record of experience it is spontaneous and mechanical and may also be obstructive and the obstructive needs to be avoided. Salbi's narrative shows how it is selective and thoroughly transformed by her construal at that moment of experience. She had to battle for a space in America geographically and culturally different from Baghdad. Relocation comes with lot of compromise and adjustment in the event you forget some of the cultural past for good or bad. Her marriage to Fakir was meant to liberate her from

Iraq but it was another confinement in Chicago. She manages to escape from the marital bond but her strivings to hide her identity from the fear of be recognized by Saddam's followers is traumatic. Her experience sensitizes us to the issues that surround the homeless, as a non-resident she had to work to form an identity in a foreign land as "the founder and president of a nonprofit organization" (p 4) where she engaged in studying the victimization of many women. She works to form a new identity because she hates to be called a pilot's daughter, she says, "It stole from me my very identity, everything I wanted to be" to form an identity she "erased the pilot's daughter's identity and started over...and created a whole new identity for myself" (p 4) she relocates to embrace a new identity caught between two cultures she enters the contested arena of identity formation in the post modern world the telling shows how contemporary discourses emphasizing post ethnicity serves to ease out the role of ethnic identity.

It goes without saying that time sequence provides a temporal structure for narrating semantic memory which makes meaning of what we know and episodic memory of what we have experienced. This makes Salibi take up the task of bringing in reforms to the troubled because she finds every woman's story is different. As an immigrant Salibi is connected to more than one nation and many cultures, her condition is similar to Homi Bhabha's description of the third space which is not merely a ' 'reflective space' but a means to describe a 'productive space.' She endeavors to urge women to speak but the irony is; she is unable to speak of her traumatic experience. "Courage was about ... revealing your own deepest secrets" (279) Being in post ethnic American context she describes the role of ethnicity in such space as one in which ethno -racial component makes her Iraqi identity emerge as a source of pride and revulsion. She could not speak about Saddam in an interview; if she did she would reveal to the world she is the pilot's daughter, the friend of Saddam. She describes herself as a refugee, a tourist, a bride, a wife, but not as a pilot's daughter or a relative of Saddam.

Her story unravels not a subjective truth but the very historicity of Iraq's social existence. This shows how suppression in a woman is bound by reasons which maybe political or personal, as she says "Every instinct in me...loyalty, anger, horror, resentment, guilt and most of all fear conspires to prevent me from speaking Saddam Hussein's name out loud" (3) displays how self narrative is constructed in the face of a public that may be nonchalant or hostile. "I feared Saddam ... and that organic fear would never leave me" (214) I am left like a traumatized child

at what I have seen” (232) She tries to find threads of continuity in the face of diversity, inconsistency, and unsteadiness. She finds her voice eventually she is someone who could be counted by using narrative as the tool of self understanding. Her description falls into the category of dominant cultural prototype memory which underlines memory as being declarative. It evinces how a translocated Arab woman writes of social exclusion, suppressed truths, about identity, and her stance in a fraught world. We see Salibi as a motivated story teller constructing and reconstructing to make sense of the past; self narrative in this sense is a dialogic between the self and the society borne out of experience to situate an order on something that is discordant.

The memoir explains Saddam’s understanding of war, to him war was defensive, and he termed his enemies as ‘fire worshipping enemies.’ (20) The conflict in Iraq was ethnic; the religious diversity between Shia and Suni Muslims was the root cause for turmoil which set Iraq on fire. The dropping of chemical weapons by Baghdad’s military regime on the Kurds in the north resulted in the killing of the whole town in matter of minutes which evinces Saddam’s Tyranny. What could be the Politics in remembering, is it to establish the validity and importance of a text based on the expertise and reputation of the past? Is it a means of instilling a feeling of nostalgia in a text? Is the act of remembering used as a method to construct individual and cultural identity? Questions such as these bother as the narrative progresses but hard to find a decisive reasoning and logic behind the very task of narrating from memory. Salbi is not only narrating but also critiquing how lack of independent media failed to record Saddam’s despotism. We see how she believes what she remembers and in this regard it is impossible to believe memory as not trustworthy, we see how in the process the teller makes sense of what the self understands. It would not be absurd to state that the individual’s memory is never bereft of social edifice. According to Jeffrey C Alexander, “Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.” (1) This is relevant to traumatic experiences of the oppressed in Iraq, Bosnia, and Rwanda as well. Cultural and ethnic conflict leads most of these traumatized victims to be an outsider in their homeland; for instance the Iranians in Iraq. Such references offer insights into Iraq’s cultural and social practices.

Anti Iranian sentiment made people vilify Iran, her family stopped celebrating Nowruz the Persian New Year. The ethnic divide between Shias and Sunnis caused estrangement; the internal ethnic struggle divided the country. She felt diffident at school she was classically considered by the Iraqi's as a Shia as it is the name of Caliph Ali's daughter. This illustrates how ethnic divide instills feeling of seclusion and isolation within one's own country's space. Saddam's dislike for Iranians resulted in Baghdad war. Salbi admits that it was Iraq and not Iran that started the war. President Bush described Saddam as another Hitler and Bush was assessing Saddam as an outsider and her account of Saddam comes closer to Bush's characterization. "...western political discourse has persistently likened Hussein to Hitler" (qtd. Tal p. 5) and Kali Tal notes "Hitler" "Jews" Nazi" and 'Holocaust' implies floating chains, signifiers in a Barthesian sense each invoking a variety of the signified" (24). War turned Iraq into a conflict zone which saw the disappearance of diverse people Iraqi-Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, the ethnic divide brought the feeling of us and they saw the erosion of simple freedom. Such divide led to bias that made people react and caused schism that resulted hatred in people in the name of ethnicity. Such experiences can be cruel, corrupt, or destroy oneself of the nation and one's sense of belonging.

This validates meanings that are deprived by individual's version and that interpretation is the product of the whole. When Media reports and political critics comment they may have their agenda's in fixing the meaning of war and conflict. Such fixation may complicate the meaning of gulf war that comes out of history, testimonials, documentary which may be cluttered with etymology which hampers our understanding. The memoir makes one accept that there is something momentous achieved in the telling of lived experiences of the self which extends itself to the rendition of the experiences of the community. It shows how as LiLi says "Process of memory involves so much selecting, editing, and revising...reconfiguring of mnemonic traces from the moment they are registered in the mind until the moment of retrieval." (3)

Her memoir could be a form of legitimating the self as a whole or could challenge the very idea of the self being a remarkable entity. "Memories do not merely describe the speaker's relation to the past but place it...quite specifically in reference to it" (Lambek 25.) Halbach, argues "Memory is structured by the identity of social group such as kinship, religion or social class...the very content of memory is a social product" (qtd LiLi P 4). Her recollections

represent the emotional needs of the people who lived through facing the turmoil of war. This also makes us understand how to approach the cultural and political revolution of Iraq by not applying labels or generalizations.

Her visit to Iraq nine year later exposes her to the poverty, to the marginalized communities. She witnesses literate mothers who had illiterate daughters owing to lack of financial restriction. These facts show the plight of the noncombatants after war, war had taken away their economic comfort and social comfort. Each woman had a story to narrate which was different. Salbi's candid report of the conditions of Iraq after and during Saddam's reign is truly substantiated when she says "courage wasn't about facing other people's injustice but about revealing our own deeper secrets" (279) such shared experiences are understood despite cultural differences. Collective memory maybe manipulated but she concretizes her memory, she sees the tyranny as a privileged child, a rebellious teenager, and a violate wife. Her narrative takes a dissident tone not reactive but receptive. She writes on the subject of the centrality of family, the debates about nation, and the construction of female centered unity in the face of obstacles. Her considerations of women's space in Iraq and America lead to critical reflections on women's lives; in so doing she tries to trace a rational route of distinctiveness.

Her memoir constitutes a story within a story the narrative is candid, linear, not an interior monologue. The narrative makes us perceive the survivors endeavoring to make their living as anyone else. It falls into the category of dominant cultural prototype memory which is declarative. It is not pictures that Salbi recounts but her effort to scrutinize the Iraqi community. In unfolding her experience we see how the narrative self centre's as a victim and as an agent of past experience challenging the reader to share a transformative experience.

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