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Zainab Salbi's Between Two Worlds: A First Hand Account

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Abstract:

Zainab Salbi, an Iraqi American writer and social activist, a co-founder and president of Women for Women International, moved to the United States at the age of twenty. The paper aims to present Salbi's firsthand experiences with the Iran–Iraq War which have sensitized her to the plight of women in the war torn countries. She has written and spoken extensively on all forms of violence against women during the war. Salbi's Between Two Worlds (2005) is an autobiographical account narrating her painful story of emergence from a victim of community pressures to a global activist. The memoir speaks of a tyrant through the eyes of a child, a rebellious teenager, a violated wife and further. Growing under the gaze of Saddam Hussein, as a daughter of a 'chosen' personal pilot of the oppressor, Salbi lets the torrent of vividly recalled memories flow out in her text.

Keywords: *trauma, identity, tyranny, war, resistance, silence, voice, plight*

We realise the importance of light when we see darkness. We realise the importance of our voice when we are silenced.
-Malala Yousafzai (Address United Nations Youth Assembly, 2013)

The metaphor of 'voice' which is at the crux of the present paper becomes significant in the light of the narratives/texts that flow out of the traumatic experiences of women who live through the formidable conditions and emerge indomitable. Finding means to communicate the suffering is vital to those who experience traumatic ordeals within the communities that spell norms and dogmas to regulate distress and agony. Telling of trauma requires translation of intense emotions related to woe into communicable language which means that from voicelessness, language has to be created to express the unspeakable. Hence the firsthand accounts are to be understood as an outburst of the inner layers of torment and affliction loaded within. These outbursts, in the form of 'narratives', may also be understood as therapeutic thus forming sites for reconstruction of an identity. The texts/memoirs that help in undoing the silences raise consciousness about the obstacles that women of the developing countries face in their mundane lives. The narratives unfold the cultural dilemmas, socio-political situations and international conflicts affecting women in the turbulent nations.

Between Two Worlds presents Salbi's quest to create a whole new identity, from a pilot's daughter to the founder and president of a non-profit women's organization, with its head quarters in the USA. Salbi herself expresses her being fortunate; to be grown up in modern Iraq's most promising decade. She acknowledges:

"While the West struggled with the oil embargo of the early 1970s, petrodollars poured into our nationalized oil monopoly. The Iraqi dinar soared, electricity lit up mud villages, modern schools and hospitals mushroomed, Japanese cars sped across new highways, and whole office buildings rose up while we were away on summer vacation. Iraqi students went abroad then on government scholarships and Saddam's socialist-based Baath Party instigated a massive compulsory campaign to combat illiteracy (and spread his ideology) that taught so many people to read so fast that Iraq became a model for the developing world and won a UNESCO prize." (Salbi, 2005, p.6)

However, Salbi grew up witnessing the other side of the picture too, and that which was much grim than the apparent hype. She came to know Saddam who had her best friend's father killed, decreed public executions and locked up people for minor disagreements. In an interview with Sarah Morrison Salbi opens up by saying:

"I cried, for the part of me that had known him as Uncle Saddam. Yes, he tormented my family, divided us, broke my mother; he was like a poisonous gas that leaked into our rooms and our kitchen. We breathed him in slowly and died slowly, but also there was a part of me who saw him as uncle. And I cried for that." (*The Independent*, 2012)

Salbi's relationship with her mother is the single important influence in her life. Her formal and her informal education may be credited to this woman who arranges her daughter to fly out of the narrow strictures and the oppressive gaze by marrying her to a Middle Eastern man living in the USA. Alia sees her daughter out of Iraq but Salbi feels trapped by the marriage as she words it in

memoir, "I had escaped prison in Iraq only to wind up in solitary confinement in Chicago. I felt depressed and trapped." (Salbi, 2005, p.179) Later this becomes the gateway to her meaningful future. Her marriage to Fakhri, the man her mother meaningfully chooses for her in order to construct a passage to the USA, proves to be abusive in every way that her mother had apprehended. However, Alia's upbringing inspires Salbi to break the cords of such a relationship.

With a clear vision and well defined goals, she enrolls at George Mason University and decides to major in women's international studies, thus chalking out her own future. Once in the USA, and among a radically different culture, Salbi envisions herself as someone different from just an Iraqi pilot's daughter, living under the privileges of Saddam. While studying her course, she is exposed to the traumas of the Bosnian War, especially the women's situation. She feels an intense obligation to use her freedom and her 'voice' for these women. She expresses,

"I wasn't sure what drove me- my own rape, my understanding of what it felt like to live in war, my outrage at the social injustice, or may be just the possibility that I could actually do something to help- but I felt as if I were on a mission." (Salbi, 2005, p.215)

Women for Women International rose out of Salbi's honest endeavour to help women in pain and to create means for a meaningful existence. Skipping from camp to camp Salbi uses her energy to reconstruct the crumbling identities. Salbi's life hereafter gears toward a well oriented position of an activist raising funds and taking out time for women in distress.

"Three months later, I went back to Croatia on my own to deliver the first sponsorship money we had raised. I spend my twenty-fourth birthday at a refugee camp in a place called Split on the Croatian coast." (Salbi, 2005, p. 220)

In the process of formation of this new identity Salbi can see parts of herself responding to various situations from the world of her action, in rising degree of intensity. Talking of her experience in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Salbi narrates the most hair-raising account of a woman who had faced a gang rape, mutilation and much more. Yet Salbi feels the awe at the courage of the women she had met around the world. This woman in Congo, named Nabito, had according to Salbi, 'a special sense of dignity.' A mother of twelve, she had witnessed the most brutal side of humanity. Listening to her experiences, Salbi questions Nabito if she could keep all this within or if she wanted to use her tale of woe for the benefit for other women. The narrator records her conversation with Nabito,

"What should I do, Nabito, when I hear stories like yours?" I had asked her. "Should we tell the world about the injustice you faced so we might help bring a stop to what is happening to other women, or should we keep our secrets to ourselves? What should we do?"

Nabito had looked me in the eyes and said, "If I could tell the whole world about what happened to me to bring justice to the men who did this to me or to prevent other women from being hurt, then I would. But I can't. You go ahead and tell the world my story, but just don't tell the neighbours." (Salbi, 2005, p.278)

In listening to the stories of women whom Salbi met while travelling to different countries, Salbi finds an interactive process of voicing of silences. As Salbi helps Nabito to speak out, she herself draws strength out of her. Nabito helps her to realize:

"I had been trying to force "the truth" out of my aunts and whatever their own truths were, they belonged to them, not to me. How arrogant I had been to demand they tell me their stories in order to find my own peace and satisfy my curiosity! What right did I have to persist in my quest to find the answer to a question my mother could not tell me when she was alive? And these thoughts led me to another: I had the right to only one story, and that was my own." (Salbi, 2005, p.279)

Between Two Worlds is not just a narration of a Zainab Salbi's escape from tyranny of Saddam's world. It is not just about a transcultural or a transnational experience that creates possibilities of departures from one and the arrival at other counters. It is an intense and deeply dug narrative that works at a very personal and intimate level and yet cultivates such meaningful relationships with women all over the world. It is a tale of self evaluation, self revelation and self assessment as Salbi herself puts it:

"Courage wasn't about facing other's people's injustice, but about revealing our own deepest secrets and risking hurting the ones we love.

What was courage about? I had been helping other women talk and then telling their stories to the rest of the world so others could understand what they were going through. But never once had I opened up to the women I worked with the way they had to me. I had preached to them about breaking their silences, yet I was afraid to break my own. I preached rising up against injustice, yet I had never acted upon the injustice in my own country for my own people." (Salbi, 2005, p.279)

Salbi's journey from 'silence' to 'voice' recounts her struggle to devise a whole new identity. Zainab Salbi's quest for identity is examined in the framework of socio-cultural and psychoanalytical approach. Erik Erikson, a German-born American Psychoanalyst, believes that the individual cannot be understood apart from his/her social context. Erikson in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968) believes that seeds of identity are planted at a young age when the child recognizes himself/herself as a unique

being, separates from his/her parents. Salbi writes, “When I was growing up in Iraq, people used to refer me as the “pilot’s daughter.” I hated that term. I still do. It stole from me my very identity, everything I want to be.” (Salbi, 2005, p.4)

Erikson states in *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1980), “Individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically related in continual change” (Erikson, 1980, p.114). Erikson considers adolescence to be a transitional period of development following childhood and leading into adulthood. Salbi lives a turbulent adolescence “in the shadows of regime of Saddam Hussein.” She sensed the oppression of her mother and aunts as well as increasing differences between her parents. Her sensitive mind registers the unanswered queries about the world within which she is raised. The rift between the parents and her mother’s attempted suicide render her mute, withdrawing into a shell of silence. In Saddam’s world Salbi feels like a “... model pasted into one pose after another for some jet-set magazine, all dressed up with a permanent smile on my face, yet completely voiceless.” (Salbi, 2005, p.101)

Erikson proposes that identity-defining issues of adolescence do not remain fixed and they retain flexibility for modification throughout the adulthood years due to new life experiences. Salbi leaves for America at the age of twenty with many silences and half-answered questions. Having fifteen years in establishing herself she is set to create a new identity. Working with women survivors of war has helped Salbi in her own healing from war and displacement. Salbi can only think of her life as fulfilled after she herself finds courage to cross the gulf between ‘silence’ and ‘voice’. Her memoir demonstrates her own growth as well as that of the women she works for.

After successfully publishing her memoir, she gets spark to ignite other women’s lives by giving ‘voice’ to their ‘silences’ through writing. She writes two more narratives in which she hasn’t tried to write about traumatic women’s stories but represents them in their own words on the basis of the interviews. Salbi ascertains that the marginalization of women happen in all parts of the world-developed and developing, poor and rich, though their form and degree may vary from one culture to another. Through the process of sharing of stories, women draw inspiration from each other and also offer a ray of hope about the possibility of change.

Zainab Salbi’s exposure to other cultures helps her to give voice to herself and to other silenced women. She learns from the diverse experiences that resistance, resilience and courage come in small acts. Her narratives are not just expressions to heal herself but they can be assessed as representations that speak volumes of significant issues related to women in crisis. Salbi feels that she has navigated two worlds. One is the world of voiceless women from war torn countries. Salbi is speaking with them, talking about their stories and helping them to get jobs, education and to unfold their faculties. The other world is the world of well-known people or from media to business community. Salbi belongs to neither world fully and is somewhere in the middle like a bridge connecting two worlds.

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