

**Self, Life and Writing: Autobiography as Scriptotherapy in Edawrd  
Said and Abdelwahab Elmessiri**

الذات و الحياة و الكتابة: السيرة الذاتية ككتابة علاجية عند ادوارد سعيد و عبد الوهاب  
المسيري

by

**Jehan Farouk Fouad**

**The Department of English Language and Literature**

بحث مقدم من:

جيهان فاروق فؤاد

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية و ادابها

يدور هذا البحث حول استخدام السيرة الذاتية كنوع من الكتابة العلاجية في السير الذاتية للمثقفين. و للسيرة الذاتية دور علاجي في حالة المثقفين و الكتاب على وجه الخصوص حيث أن فعل الكتابة يساعد هؤلاء على النزول من أبراجهم العاجية و التعبير عن دواخلهم و ما يعترهم من متناقضات و من صراعات داخلية هذا بالطبع بخلاف ما يواجهونه من صعوبات الحياة و تحدياتها. يناقش هذا البحث عمليين هما "خارج المكان" لإدوارد سعيد ١٩٩٩ و "رحلتي الفكرية: سيرة غير ذاتية غير موضوعية: في الجذور و البذور و الثمار" لعبد الوهاب المسيري ٢٠٠٦. و رغماً من أن أياً من الكاتبين لم يمر بما يمكن اعتباره صدمة نفسية حقيقية إلا أنهما قد واجها تحديات عديدة سببت لهما الألم و اللوعة و أثرت على سير حياتهما أياً تأثير. و بالتالي فإن هذا البحث يهتم بدراسة التأثيرات النفسية للكتابة و كيف تتحول في هذه الحالة الى نوع من الكتابة العلاجية.

و ينقسم البحث الى موضوع رئيسي تتفرع منه عدد من الموضوعات الجانبية المرتبطة به. و الموضوع الرئيسي في هذه الحالة هو استخدام الكتابة بوجه عام و السيرة الذاتية بوجه خاص كنوع من أنواع الكتابة العلاجية. يبدأ البحث بتبيان الصعوبات و التحديات التي واجهها الكاتبان في حياتهما الشخصية و في رحلتها عبر الزمان و المكان مدلاً على ذلك بالأمثلة و الإقتباسات اللازمة. ثم يتجه البحث الى دراسة محورية فعل الكتابة في حد ذاته بالنسبة لهؤلاء الكتاب و تأثير الكتابة كفعل إعترافي في التخفيف من الامهم بل و تحويل هذه الآلام الى أعمال فكرية و إبداعية. كانت الكتابة بالنسبة لإدوارد سعيد هي المتنفس الأمثل لتحويل إحساسه الدائم بالإغتراب الى فعل إيجابي يساعده على جمع شتات نفسه و التغلب على أزمة الهوية التي يمر بها. أما المسيري فكان يلجأ الى الكتابة ليتغلب على قلقه الفكري الدائم و الذي كان غالباً وليد اشتباكه مع العديد من الأفكار و الأيديولوجيات و الذي كان عليه حسمه في نهاية الأمر ليحظى بالسلام النفسي المنشود. و في حالة كلاً من الكاتبين وفرت الكتابة الإبداعية الفرصة للذات لتتأمل رحلتها في الحياة و في علم الفكر كذلك و ربما لتعيد النظر في القرارات التي اتخذتها أو تستمرئ استرجاع بعض ما عايشته من تجارب و لتستريح في جميع الأحوال من عبء الإعتراف بما داخلها من متاعب.

This paper explores two autobiographies/memoirs where writing an autobiography serves as scriptotherapy for intellectuals, helping them out of their Olympian detachment and providing a therapeutic effect that helps relieve their inner dilemmas. The two autobiographies/memoirs addressed by this paper are: *Edward Said's Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999), and Abdelwahab Elmessiri's *Rehlaty Al Fikriyah: Fi al Gozoor wa al Bozoor wa al Thamar: Sira Ghayr Zatiyah Ghayr Mawdw`iyah (My Intellectual Journey: of Seeds, Roots and Fruits: a Non-objective, Non-subjective Autobiography)* (2006). Though the two intellectuals have not been through a traumatic experience as such, they have experienced moments of extreme anguish and their 'selves' have been shaped and re-shaped by a number of inner dilemmas and surrounding challenges.

The paper is arranged around a number of subthemes related to the central theme of autobiography as scriptotherapy. The paper starts by highlighting the hardships and conflicts encountered by both intellectuals through their journeying in place and time. It then addresses the ultimate centrality of 'writing', and more particularly of the 'confessional act' of writing to these intellectuals as evident in their autobiographies and elsewhere. For Edward Said 'writing' was a means to help him put his disseminated 'self' back together and re-assemble the varied components of his identity at odd with each other. Similarly, one reason Elmessiri wrote his many books and encyclopedias to relieve the many personal and intellectual anxieties he was subject to and the various dilemmas he had to resolve. Testimonial writing grants the space needed for the 'self' to contemplate its own identity and to reflect on its journeying through life, re-experiencing vitality, re-considering life choices and most of all get relieved of the burden of having a confession to tell.

**Self, Life and Writing: Autobiography as Scriptotherapy in Edward Said and Abdelwahab Elmessiri**

**Jehan Farouk Fouad**

" The selves we display in autobiographies are doubly constructed, not only in the act of writing a life story but also in a lifelong process of identity formation of which the writing is usually a comparatively late phase. "

(Paul Eakin)

'Autobiography' is a comparatively new literary genre, as the term itself started to be used in the English language as late as the end of the Eighteenth Century. Until recently, life stories, personal journals, and memoirs were not taken very seriously and critics were more than reluctant to view them as 'literature.' In the course of self-writing, the term 'autobiography' has more than one valid definition. One straightforward definition divides the word into three parts; the stem '*auto*' meaning 'self', '*bio*', derived from the Greek root, meaning 'life' or "mode of living", and finally '*graphy*', also derived from Greek, meaning 'writing.' The linkage between the three domains is evident in autobiography as a literary genre and as a discursive practice. It is also stressed by specialists in the field; James Goodwin, for one, maintains in *Autobiography: The Self Made Text* (1993) that "the alliance between discourse and narrative in autobiography aligns and clarifies the interwoven pattern of self, life, and writing that constitutes a text of autobiography."<sup>1</sup> The same definition is applicable to memoirs. Though the terms 'autobiography' and 'memoir' are sometimes used interchangeably, it is a common belief that a 'memoir' mostly covers 'part of a life' and usually concerns itself more with capturing scenes of particular worth. And since it sometimes includes a description of life 'events' rather than a description of 'life,' in a memoir the writer sometimes reflects on the incidents of public life and cultural or political events. By contrast, "an autobiography represents the writer's efforts, made at a certain stage of life, to portray the meaning of personal experience as it has developed over the course of a

---

<sup>1</sup> P.17

significant period of time *or* from the distance of that significant time period."<sup>2</sup>

In order to convey the personal experience of the author in a way that is significant to the reader, the majority of autobiographies have a recurring structure. In her book *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography* (1984), Susanna Egan specifies four patterns which control the theme and structure of most autobiographies. These four patterns are: childhood, youth, maturity, and old age. The four patterns draw on four metaphors or 'myths' which have their origin in mythology, religion, sociology and psychology i.e. the 'edenic myth,' the 'journey' or 'pilgrimage,' 'conversion' and finally 'confession.' But if there is a single pattern that could be singled out in all autobiographies it would be 'confession.' The need for 'confession' lies behind the writing of most, if not all, autobiographies. Among other things, confession involves revelation, self-clarification, self-defense and apology. In *Memory and Narrative* (1998), James Onley, one of the most distinguished scholars of autobiography, maintains that most autobiographies evolve around the idea of 'confession.' Onley traces the development of autobiography as a genre through an analysis of three distinguished autobiographies i.e. St. Augustine's *Confessions* (397- 400 AD), Beckett's *Company* (1980) and Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782). He contends that the three selected works "stand like colossi each fully capable of giving his name to the age in which he lived and wrote."<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on the above-suggested definition of autobiography as the genre that links 'self,' 'life' and 'writing,' I ponder on writing as confession and, more significantly, writing as scriptotherapy. The term 'scriptotherapy' is derived from the Latin root '*scriptum*', meaning 'thing written', and '*therapia*', 'to nurse or cure.'<sup>4</sup> It was Shoshana Felman who made the famous declaration that we are now living in what might be termed "age of testimony."<sup>5</sup> For Felman, testimony, as "a privileged contemporary mode of transmission and communication," helps overcome the traumatic event.<sup>6</sup> Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that

---

<sup>2</sup> Goodwin P.11

<sup>3</sup> P. xi

<sup>4</sup> Riordan P.264

<sup>5</sup> P.17

<sup>6</sup> P.17

are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena”<sup>7</sup>. The method of writing out traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment is termed by Suzette Henke as "scriptotherapy."<sup>8</sup> Thus, literature is regarded as scriptotherapy if it helps the traumatized heal and become re-integrated into society. In other words, scriptotherapy serves as “a testimonial writing which works to re-externalize trauma so that it can be properly intergraded into the sufferers' life and that of their society.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the early attempts at defining the therapeutic effects of writing was that of Gordon Allport (1942). Allport, the first psychologist to highlight the relation between writing and psychology, stressed the usability of personal documents such as journals, memoirs and autobiographies to reveal one's mind. He advised that such personal documents should be accredited by psychologists as valid healing methods. In a similar vein, Richard Riordan defines 'scriptotherapy' as “the deliberate use of writing designed to enhance therapeutic outcomes.”<sup>10</sup> Riordan points out that “verbally labeling and describing a trauma through writing allows an individual to cognitively process the event and gain a sense of control, thus reducing the work of inhibition”<sup>11</sup> Riordan warns against the deliberate reduction of the scope and applicability of 'scriptotherapy' to clinical illness or commercial workbooks. He refers to Progoff's “At a Journal Workshop” (1975), where he investigates the value and use of journaling, in the creative experience. In Progoff's theory, many life difficulties stem from the conflict between the conscious self and the unconscious self. Writing personal journals helps achieve the wished-for reconciliation between the two sides of the self. Riordan concludes that writing can be therapeutic through “allowing the unconscious to become conscious.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> P. 91

<sup>8</sup> P.xii

<sup>9</sup> Gibbons P.64

<sup>10</sup> P.264

<sup>11</sup> P.264

<sup>12</sup> P.266

Though no tangible empirical evidence is provided, Riordan refers to some experiments where adults, especially those sixty years plus, were engaged in guided autobiography writing techniques for healing purposes. Though no formal results were announced of

Likewise, in “Beneficial effects of writing and narration in the context of a traumatic experience” (2012) Emilia Soroko points out that “pro-health functions of writing in the context of a traumatic experience may result from elaborating on an experience in a narrative manner and from meaning-making process which in turn can influence the sense of inner integration”<sup>13</sup> Yet studies have proved that some people benefit from the therapeutic effects of writing more than others. As Soroko indicates, “it might be assumed that some individuals may have a bigger tendency to express their own experiences in a narrative manner and to narrative reporting – they may have a bigger self-narrative inclination.”<sup>14</sup> Autobiography particularly functions as scriptotherapy in the case of intellectuals since writers are more aware of the function of writing as a therapeutic activity of the mind and the soul. Writing an autobiography provides the space needed for the self to contemplate its life happenings and to reflect on the formation of its own identity. Writing allows intellectuals to re-experience the vitality of their journeying through life, to reconsider their previously-made life choices and most of all to eventually get rid of the burden of having a confession to tell.

This paper explores two autobiographies/memoirs where writing an autobiography serves as a scriptotherapy for intellectuals, helping them out of their Olympian detachment and providing a therapeutic effect that helps relieve their most distressing inner dilemmas. The two autobiographies/memoirs addressed by this paper are: *Edward Said's Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999), and Abdelwahab Elmessiri's *Rehlaty Al Fikriyah: Fi al Gozoor wa al Bozoor wa al Thamar: Sira Ghayr Zatiyah Ghayr Mawdw`iyah (My Intellectual Journey: of Seeds, Roots and Fruits: a Non-objective, Non-subjective Autobiography)* (2006).<sup>15</sup> Edward Said is an Arab intellectual whose writings mainly tackled East-West cultural discourse. In "Edward Said's *Out of Place: Criticism:*

---

tangible improvements on many levels, it was repeatedly noticed that those adults showed more appreciation of the worth of their previous lives after writing those autobiographies. In some experiments, “writing the autobiography helped clients develop self-discipline, self-acceptance, responsibility, control, and personal choice” (270).

<sup>13</sup> p.23

<sup>14</sup> p.12

<sup>15</sup> Upon being translated into English, the title of the autobiography has been changed by the editor to *The Intellectual Journey of an Islamic Humanist: An Autobiography*. All citations in this paper refer to the forthcoming English translation of the autobiography rather than the original Arabic text.

Polemic, and Arab American Identity" (2006), Hossam Aboul-ela categorized Edward Said as an Arab American rather than an Arab (or an American)<sup>16</sup>. A graduate of Princeton and Harvard and the writer of many outstanding books like, *Intentions and Method* (1975) and *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said has been known as a renowned American critic. However, in "*Orientalism*"; especially in the pages describing the U.S. policy in the Middle East, "the tone of the work becomes noticeably more irritable and disparaging, presaging Said's later trend toward a polemical tone of advocacy in his writing."<sup>17</sup> Abdelwahab Elmessiri, an Egyptian intellectual also addressed the intricacies related to the paradigmatical differences between Eastern and Western cultures in his works. In his *Encyclopedia of Jews and Judaism* and in his other books on politics Elmessiri raises political issues yet never forgetting his socio-philosophical analytical approach.

Probably the two intellectuals have not been through a traumatic experience as such, yet they have experienced moments of extreme anguish and their 'selves' have been shaped and re-shaped by a number of inner dilemmas and surrounding challenges<sup>18</sup>. It is the argument of this paper that surviving those life occurrences would not have been possible without the therapeutic effect of writing in general and writing an autobiography in particular. The rationale behind opting for these two autobiographies/autobiographers in particular is that as intellectuals they stand in close proximity. Both are prolific writers who have written extensively on philosophy, sociology, culture, and literature. Also being contemporaries, who flourished in the second half of the twentieth century, both Said and Elmessiri are prominent Arab intellectuals who belong to a distinctive generation of Arab *intellegencia* that has actively participated in carrying out change in Arab societies. More importantly, both intellectuals have experienced a perceptible struggle of the 'self' through 'life,' a struggle that was gracefully transformed into their writings. Many studies have been written on Said's memoir, much less on Elmessir's. What is new about this

---

<sup>16</sup> p 16-18

<sup>17</sup> P.20

<sup>18</sup> Right after he got his PhD, psychologist Abraham Maslow studied the work of two of his professors whom he used to admire. Maslow was curious to know what made those professors so exceptional and he came to the conclusion that they share certain personal traits like, problem solving skills, the willingness to take risks, the ability to handle life challenges, etc.

study is that it attempts an analysis of the two autobiographies/memoirs in the light of the concept of scriptotherapy, and that it reads the two works side by side, rather than reading them apart.

The paper is arranged around a number of subthemes related to the central theme of scriptotherapy in the autobiographies of intellectuals. Supporting details and examples from both autobiographies will be provided as pertaining to the major theme or to the subthemes. The paper starts by highlighting the hardships and conflicts encountered by both intellectuals through their journeying in place and time whether in the personal domain or in the public one. It will then address the ultimate centrality of 'writing', and more particularly of the confessional 'act' of writing to these intellectuals as evident in their autobiographies and elsewhere. A closer examination of the two autobiographies in the light of the notion of scriptotherapy is provided through an analysis of the perspective used throughout. Then the argument extends to include a discussion of technical aspects like the phrasing of the title/subtitle, the tone employed and the role of language as a healing medium.

### ***The distressing pilgrimage of Said and Elmessiri***

The life journeys of the two intellectuals were challenging, highly-educative and quite rich with significant, at times radical, intellectual transformations . Said, a Palestinian who lived in Egypt in his formative years, and who moved to the United States where he lived the greater part of his life as an immigrant, though originally an American citizen, had more than one source of agony in his life. He refers to these sources of anguish as "cages" in his *Out of Place*: "I wanted to get beyond the various *cages* in which I found myself placed, and which made me feel so dissatisfied, and even distasteful to myself"[italics mine].<sup>1</sup> The first cage Said found himself locked up in was his own name, as it hinted at the double identity he had. Said's name recalled his "numerous lives, being a non-Egyptian of uncertain, not to say suspicious, composite identity habitually out of place, and representing a person with no recognizable profile and no particular direction."<sup>2</sup> He points out that it took him so long to become familiar with the name 'Edward', "a foolishly English name

---

<sup>1</sup> P.31

<sup>2</sup> OP 6

yoked forcibly to the unmistakably Arabic family name Said.”<sup>1</sup> He sarcastically describes how he dealt with this inner conflict in his memoir: “for years, and depending on the exact circumstances, I would rush past “Edward” and emphasize “Said;” at other times I would do the reverse, or connect these two to each other so quickly that neither would be clear”<sup>2</sup> !

Born in Jerusalem in 1935, and then raised in Cairo and the United States, Said had three identities rather than one. He writes in his memoir: "To me, nothing more painful and paradoxically sought after characterizes my life than the many displacements from countries, cities, abodes, languages, environments that have kept me in motion all these years."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Palestine was never home for Said. It was never the 'Edenic myth' that one would stay nostalgic to for the rest of his life. He maintains in *After the Last Sky* (1986) that for him "Palestine is exile, dispossession, the inaccurate memories of one place slipping into vague memories of another, a confused recovery of general wares, passive presences scattered around in the Arab environment."<sup>4</sup> On being asked by Tariq Ali about Jerusalem and how he viewed it as a child, Said answered: "well, I never much cared for it. I found it an austere, rather cheerless town. Associated in my mind, to this day, with death and religion, neither of which I'm particularly fond of."<sup>5</sup> Said confesses that he always preferred Cairo to Jerusalem since Cairo always gave him this feeling of belonging to a civilization larger than himself. The Cairo Said nostalgically recalls is the cosmopolitan Cairo that so many foreigners enjoyed at the time: "Cairo was never more cosmopolitan. In my parents' box at the opera house we took in the Italian opera season, the Ballet des Champs-Élysées, the Comédie Française; Krauss and Furtwängler at the Rivoli; Kempff and Cortot at Edwart Hall."<sup>6</sup> Gradually however things have changed after 1952. Egypt became "a place no longer hospitable to foreigners, and particularly to privileged enclaves."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> p.3

<sup>2</sup> p.3

<sup>3</sup> *Out of Place* 217

<sup>4</sup> p.30

*Out of Place* will be afterwards cited in in-text citation as 'OP', and *After the last Sky* as 'Sky'.

<sup>5</sup> p.23

<sup>6</sup> OP 200

<sup>7</sup> OP 199

Said viewed his body as one of the cages that imprisoned him. Showing a mild deformity, it always worried his father and in turn worried him: "What I cannot completely forgive, though, is that the contest over my body, and his administering of reforms and physical punishment, instilled a deep sense of generalized fear in me, which I have spent most of my life trying to overcome. I still sometimes think of myself as a coward, with some gigantic lurking disaster waiting to overtake me for sins I have committed and will soon be punished for"<sup>1</sup>. This caused him to lose self-confidence as the criticism about his physical shape came from his parents, the ones who should be supporting him: "I internalized the criticism, and became even more awkward about and uncertain of my physical identity"<sup>2</sup>.

An additional cage where Said felt detained is the cage of family. In Egypt, Said's family was part of the "*shami*" community, a term used by Egyptians to describe someone who comes from Greater Syria. This led Said to internalize the sense of estrangement and alienation that will continue to accompany him for the rest of his life. Said's father, Wadie Ibrahim, was a typical patriarchal figure who created in Said no less than an Oedipus complex. He was born in Jerusalem and only later became an American citizen for serving ten years in the U.S forces during World War I. A successful businessman, Wadie often criticized young Said for his weak physique and undisciplined life style. To balance the roughness of his father, Said's mother, a Lebanese born in Nazareth, "communicated a kind of melting softness and supportive sentiment."<sup>3</sup> Said mother, who had great faith in him, used to address him as "Good Hamlet", something that surely left him, even temporarily, content and assured: "I felt that she was speaking to my better, less disabled, and still fresh self, hoping perhaps to lift me out of the sodden delinquency of my file, already burdened with worries and anxieties that I was now sure were to threaten my future"<sup>4</sup>. On the long run, unfortunately, Said discovered that he relied more and more on his mother's approval as the sole source of confidence: "In this way I gradually lost my confidence, retaining only a fragile sense of security in self or surroundings"<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> OP 65-66

<sup>2</sup> OP 67

<sup>3</sup> OP 45

<sup>4</sup> OP 52

<sup>5</sup> OP 46

Said's life as a young boy was governed by a strict schedule that sternly incorporated a number of activities including sports, music lessons, and social gatherings. Part of Said's upbringing was the sports he used to practice including tennis, swimming, football, riding, cricket, Ping-Pong, sailing, and boxing. Though he never showed exceptional brilliance in any of these sports, this endowed him with "a very unusual stamina and wind"<sup>1</sup>. An infatuation with music that haunted Said's mother was also passed on to him. "Music was an enormously rich and haphazardly organized world of magnificent sounds and sights", he believes<sup>2</sup>. "Going to the opera in the winter months represented a great increase in my knowledge of music—of composers, repertory, performers, traditions"<sup>3</sup>. Though these activities definitely helped in the intellectual formation of Said, they sometimes gave him the sense of being imprisoned within an intellectual bubble of the sort. "Permanently out of place, the extreme and rigid regime of discipline and extracurricular education that my father would create and in which I became imprisoned from the age of nine left me no respite or sense of myself beyond its rules and patterns."<sup>4</sup>

From 1942 through to 1946, Said attended the Gezira Preparatory School referred to in his memories as (GPS). There he faced the pressure to become English, as the curriculum was normally based on English history, culture and literature, alien as it is to the surrounding Egyptian culture and lifestyle. In 1946, Said started at the Cairo School for American Children (CSAC) : "The major change was the replacement of British institutions and individuals by the victorious Americans, the old empire giving way to the new"<sup>5</sup>. The British and the American school systems, the former rigid and authoritative, the latter interactive and entertaining, formed an extra burden for Said. In other words, the educational system did not offer the comfort zone Said was seeking in school as an alternative to the distressing life he led at home: "There was nothing so satisfying in the outside world, a merry-go-round of changing schools (and hence friends and acquaintances)"<sup>6</sup>. Said confesses to Tariq Ali that he mostly depended on himself, not on the school system, to get himself educated: "Independent strength or nascent will: it marked the beginning of my refusal to

---

<sup>1</sup> OP 67-68

<sup>2</sup> OP 96

<sup>3</sup> OP 98

<sup>4</sup> OP 19

<sup>5</sup> OP 82

<sup>6</sup> OP 6

be the passive 'Ed Said' who went from one assignment or deadline to the next with scarcely a demurral"<sup>1</sup> .

During his university years at Princeton and Harvard, Said got the chance to live "at a great distance from the Palestine of remote memory, unresolved sorrow, and uncomprehending anger."<sup>2</sup> Academic life there, in addition, allowed for Said's intellectual self to emerge as he had to oppose mainstream ideas rather than being submissive to them. He says: "I feel that authorities, canons, dogmas, orthodoxies, establishments, are really what we're up against. At least what I'm up against, most of the time. They deaden thought."<sup>3</sup> One of the dogmas Said challenged was Christianity. A Christian by birth, he has gradually adopted secularism and stressed its suitability to resolve ethnic and religious conflicts. But, unlike postmodernists who aimed to deconstruct cultural identities, Said dreamt of creating a space where those cultural identities coexist<sup>4</sup>.

Another dilemma that haunted Said for long is politics; it is all about standing in this perplexing spot where many roads intersect: U.S. foreign policy, its policy towards racial minorities, Said's personal life occurrences as a Palestinian-American, and his views as an intellectual. Though many critics attacked *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said's political views became more accentuated in later works like *The Question of Palestine* (1979) and *Covering Islam* (1997). When he first began writing about politics, his mother's comment was: "it will ruin you"<sup>5</sup> . Luckily, it did not ruin him ; it rather turned him into an icon for many Arabs and Arab-Americans and a truly controversial figure for others.

The last, and probably the most painful, cage that imprisoned Said is the cage of cancer. Aboul-ela recalls more than one event in Said's life where

---

<sup>1</sup> OP 236

<sup>2</sup> OP 141

<sup>3</sup> qtd. in Ali 104

<sup>4</sup> Huda El-Akkad in "*Confronting Western Culture: Sons of the Arab World Theorize on Postmodernism and Globalism*" (2002), points out that "Said's global project is an attempt to reach a homogeneous culture that combines some elements from western postmodernism with a trend of humanism that does not submit to the imperialist discourse. He thinks of a trend of thought that depends on secularism as a means of resisting any essentialising tendencies, concentrating instead on emancipating the oppressed all over the world."(p.294)

<sup>5</sup> OP117

"personal trauma and high politics are overlaid."<sup>1</sup> One is when he was first informed of being diagnosed with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukaemia (CLL) in 1991 when he was in a seminar organized by Palestinian activists in London, discussing prospects on the eve of the Madrid Peace conference. In his memoir, Said eloquently describes how cancer slowly invaded his body shortening his life:

I know that my illness creeps invisibly on, more secretly and insidiously than the time announced by my first watch, which I carried with so little awareness then of how it numbered my mortality, divided it up into perfect, unchanging intervals of unfulfilled time forever and ever.<sup>2</sup>

Like in the case of Said, the pilgrimage of Elmessiri was rich and adventurous, yet, in some respects, agonizing. He was born in the Nile delta small town of Damanhour, a town "steeped in the aroma of history" as he puts it.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Unlike Said who faced an identity crisis that deeply affected his self-concept, Elmessiri used to pride himself in his name, his hometown, his home country, etc. His very name is referred to in the opening pages of his autobiography as one of the identity indicators: "'my' name was linked to our family's name by generation upon generation of fathers who, cumulatively, over the centuries, begat each other until they finally begat me: Abdelwahab Muhammad Ahmad Ali Ghuneim Salim Izz Elmessiri"<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> P.28

<sup>2</sup> p.5.

Joseph A. Buttigieg saw Edward Said's death as a disaster for the marginalized throughout the world: "The disadvantaged and the dispossessed have been rendered even more destitute by the permanent silencing of a voice that spoke truth to power with unmatched eloquence" (p.5). Yet Steven Salaita in "Eulogizing Edward Said" (2004) shows how Said's death, polarized readers who are aware of his writings in politics and in cultural criticism, both on the level of institutions and on the level of academic and non-academic journals. Yet for Salaita the most important revelation was that "death occasioned a barrage of polemical attacks by Zionists and neoconservatives, usually ignorant of Said's actual politics and resorting to distortion and slander". Salaita particularly refers to a post by Hillel Halkin in Jerusalem Post describing Said as "manipulative" and "pretentious" and referring to his book *The Question of Palestine* (1979) as "dishonest" condemning its "usual misrepresentations of Zionism and Israel". As a Palestinian American, Salaita sees this as an example of how "Said's writings are so misunderstood, in turn allowing neoconservatives to demonize him" (P.248).

<sup>3</sup> *My Intellectual Journey* (P.7)

Elmessiri explores how the town came to have its name: "During my childhood in Damanhour, we were told that the name of the town came from the phrase "*dam nuhour*" (rivers of blood), because blood had once flowed through the streets like rivers. The reference was doubtless to some battle that was fought long ago in the city. Later, it became clear that this interpretation was simply a part of our folklore, and that the name Damanhour was in fact derived from "damin Horus", meaning "The city of the god Horus" (P.7).

<sup>4</sup> P.7

However, at an early age, Elmessiri frequently felt estranged from his capitalist family, which belonged to what might be labeled a “rural bourgeoisie.”<sup>1</sup> His father, another patriarchal figure, was one of the most important merchants in Damanhour, who would from time to time ask for his sons' assistance in the shops he owns, but who insisted that his sons do not have anything to do with whether his wealth increases or decreases and that his sons should enjoy the same standard of living as sons of civil servants, no less and no more. Having a fervent personality, Elmessiri's father was as far as could be from the world of intellect, yet he still bragged that his son showed early signs of genius as a writer. Elmessiri confesses that he inherited his father's "sense of humour, his dynamic character, and his ability to rise above the circumstances of the particular moment."<sup>2</sup> Whether that 'dynamic character' of his father had implanted in Elmessiri an Oedipus complex of the sort or not, he was always thankful that his father granted him the needed space and freedom to choose his path in life, something which could be regarded as a blessing. He was also thankful that there were other relatives, school teachers, and community members who provided him with role models "on which I could pattern myself, and through which I was able to outgrow my father and break free from him."<sup>3</sup> Elmessiri also refers to the fact that as a child and an adolescent he got the chance to be involved in a variety of community activities. He also recalls his childhood memories in Damanhour, and the traditional children games there which, unfortunately, are about to disappear.

Religious faith was one of the crucial dilemmas in Elmessiri's intellectual journey where he surfed from atheism to religious faith. He described this transition in his autobiography under the title: "Pains of Transition and Conversion". Whereas Said adopted secularism and criticized Christianity, Elmessiri started as skeptical atheist only later to convert to Islam<sup>4</sup>. In his prime, Elmessiri was a materialist and a Marxist troubled by the dichotomies of 'materialism' and 'humanism,' the 'physical' and the 'metaphysical,' the 'secular'

---

<sup>1</sup> P.8

<sup>2</sup> P.46

<sup>3</sup> P.32

<sup>4</sup> He argued that the existence of God is the only guarantee for the human complexity and multi-dimensionality of man. God is the infinite Being who transcends the boundaries of the material given, and He is the ultimate *telos* whose existence helps man transcend the world of nature-matter. The core of Elmessiri's Islam is the belief in the idea of transcendence and the rejection of the idea of immanence. That is reflected on a rejection of monism and a belief in dualities, i.e. the duality of man and nature, creator and created, body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

and the 'sacred.' He ended up by rejecting 'Western modernity' proposing instead 'human modernism,' a term of his coinage which refers to a modernism that builds on the concept of common humanity and which encourages man to fulfill his inner potential. And the dilemma he encountered was resolved in favor of 'humanism' and in favor of 'Islam', that is why he came to believe in what he called 'humanitarian Islam', which is a mixture of both. Elmessiri describes the "pains" of those transitional moments in his life in his autobiography: "I suffered such moments of absolute doubt and revulsion. But, thanks to my faith in both God and man, I always returned from them to the world of consciousness, of limits, and of the ability to transcend" <sup>1</sup> .

Another conflict that Elmessiri got involved in is the political conflict. As a child, Elmessiri had his little fight with the colonizer during the British occupation of Egypt. He formed a secret society, together with his fellows, to fight the British occupation, boycotting British products and issuing a magazine at school that became a platform for revolutionary ideas. He writes: "We used to burn English goods on Al-Sa'ah (The Clock) square. We seized the opportunity to burn our English text books as well, hoping that God would bless us and the Arab Nation with a complete evacuation – not only would the British occupier leave our beloved Egypt, but he would take the much-loathed English language with him when he went."<sup>2</sup> At Damanhour Secondary School, Elmessiri complains, the very architecture of the buildings was colonial:

The front area was given over to a small garden leading up to a great number of marble steps – maybe as many as fifty – at the top of which were a number of pillars with Corinthian capitals surmounted by a Roman frontispiece. Perhaps this style was designed to strike awe into the hearts of the Egyptians, and impress on us the power of the Empire and the glory of western civilization.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> P.508. Materialistic philosophy is deeply rooted in the discourse of Western modernity which Elmessiri termed as 'Darwinian Modernism,' a modernism where the natural man casts off any moral or ethical values and rules the world through natural/materialistic laws. Haggag Ali argues in "Modernity in the Discourse of Abdelwahab Elmessiri" that "Elmessiri's critique of modernity can be seen as an attempt to Islamize modernity but, ironically, he does so via Western critique itself, especially the construction of the duality of immanence and transcendence"(P.72).

<sup>2</sup> P.10

<sup>3</sup> P.13

At a later stage of his life, Elmessiri actively participated in the anti-regime riots and events in Egypt, later appointed as the general coordinator of the Egyptian movement against the heredity of presidency in Mubarak's family widely known as *kifaya*. He was thus targeted by the anti-riot police more than once in his late sixties. His activism is praised by many as it challenges the stereotype of the intellectual who lives in the ivory tower isolated from people's pains and pathos. "Alongside stirringly inspiring scholarly efficacy, daunting

But Elmessiri's basic political involvement was definitely with the Palestinian-Israeli struggle. He spent at least twenty five years studying the history of the conflict as related to Judaism, Zionism and Western modernism.

Elmessiri's last battle and unconquerable pain was that of cancer. One of the most painful moments in his entire life was when a renowned cancer specialist informed him of having cancer. He writes:

The doctor told me, without raising his eyes from the paper he was writing on, that I now had which would require treatment by chemical infusion (in simple language, even stronger medication than the one I had been taking). He also told me that I had to go to a certain hospital on the following Wednesday or the one after, where I would stay for four days to start the new chemo-therapy protocol. Then he added very casually that I had only four more years to live.<sup>1</sup>

Being diagnosed with multiple myeloma, Elmessiri was under treatment for around ten years. In his autobiography, under the title 'Consciousness of Disease and Death', Elmessiri narrates how he received treatment during these years and how he managed to keep working and enjoying life in spite of his disease. He peacefully passed away in a small hospital in Cairo administered by Palestinians and called "Palestine"<sup>2</sup>.

### *Autobiographies as therapeutic writing*

The inner conflicts, dilemmas and agonies of the two intellectuals were reflected in their writings, especially in their autobiographies, serving in this case as scriptotherapy as argued earlier. To start with Edward Said, 'writing' for him was a means of re-assembling the varied parts of his identity mostly at odd with each other. A Christian by birth, the idea of the necessity of confession must have been lurking somewhere deep inside Said. This is evident in many of his books especially in his renowned *Orientalism* (1978). It is also manifest in

---

cerebral worth, and an impressive career, as an activist, Elmessiri exemplifies elite human ethos marked by unwavering commitment to the cause of social justice." "In Memoriam" (P.iv)

<sup>1</sup> P.67

<sup>2</sup> P.iii

In memoriam of Elmessiri, The editor of the *Arab Studies Quarterly* back in 2008 lamented Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri, "a true twentieth century polymath, an astounding defender of intellect and history, and a methodologically innovative Arab scholar"

his memoirs where he gets the chance to review his exceptional life path, a path of an intellectual with a hybrid identity. On being asked in an interview conducted by Tariq Ali about his memories Said maintains : "It's an account of growing up in this rather peculiar way that I grew up in, which has no known – to my mind, anyway – equivalent".<sup>1</sup> In narrating those life events and experiences Said depended mainly on his perfect memory as he insists in *Out of Place*: It was only his memory "prying into a very distant and essentially irrecoverable past—seemed hospitable and generous to my often importunate forays. "<sup>2</sup>

The very depiction of that "irrecoverable past" is in itself a noteworthy contribution according to Stathis Gourgouris. In his article on "the Late Style of Edward Said" (2007) , Gourgouris remarks that Said's memoir pictures a unique world that is forever gone as it is "an extensive meditation on the parameters of social life, on a person's struggle to create meaning solely within this world."<sup>3</sup> Said felt it was of much importance to chronicle for the period he spent in the Arab world and in the United States. He confesses that, at that time "a vague narrative impulse seemed to be stirring inside him." <sup>4</sup> Since he was diagnosed with leukaemia as mentioned earlier, he felt compelled to write hastily as he used to "feel the pressure of time hastening and running out."<sup>5</sup> One of the pro-health functions of writing is that it kept Said focused and saved him from falling prey to depression. It well-worked for him during his weakest moments: "I fought the medical soporifics bitterly, as if my identity depended on that resistance even to my doctor's advice."<sup>6</sup> The memoirs came out in 1999 and won the *New Yorker* award for non-fiction.

Just as writing was therapeutic for Said, it also worked as a therapy for Elmessiri. A prolific writer as he was, Elmessiri published a good number of books and articles both in English and Arabic, let alone two or three encyclopaedias, a series of children's stories, a book of poetry and an

---

<sup>1</sup> P.122

<sup>2</sup> P.216

<sup>3</sup> P.37

<sup>4</sup> OP 215

<sup>5</sup> OP 222

<sup>6</sup> OP 295

autobiography!<sup>1</sup> Elmessiri has repeatedly maintained that he has a clear vision of an 'epistemological project'<sup>2</sup> under whose umbrella all those works might be enlisted. Though writing was on one level therapeutic for Elmessiri, yet on another level it was his sense of mission that kept him writing all these years, as he was over conscious of the stereotype of the Arab and Islamic intellectual who is commonly underrepresented:

It was never a personal project geared to bringing me fame, or pleasure, or self- fulfillment at the expense of others. It was always a broad humanistic ambition that was driving me, whether I was studying Zionism, or writing children's stories, or even changing the architecture and furniture of my house!<sup>3</sup>

Elmessiri declares in the introduction to his autobiography: "On one level, I wrote this intellectual autobiography as an attempt to uncover the *personal anxiety* that lay behind my *intellectual anxiety*, and which ultimately manifested as the set of questions with which I found myself confronted in my work [italics mine]."<sup>4</sup> Yet in the opening pages, Elmessiri also highlights his sense of mission as an Arab intellectual who attempts to transcend the 'personal' reaching out for the 'national' and the 'pan-Arab' and/or the 'Islamic'. He therefore refrains from the inclusion of some personal details since his aim is rather to trace "the mental development of an Egyptian-Arab intellectual".<sup>5</sup> The urge behind many of his writings including his autobiography is to offer a mind-mapping of how an intellectual thinks or a Meta analysis of the mental processes involved in the writing process labeled by Elmessiri as 'paradigms.'

*The Encyclopaedia of Jews, Judaism and Zionism* (1999) is Elmessiri's *magnum opus* which required him to follow a relentless routine for so many years:

---

<sup>1</sup> See also my study on Elmessiri entitled "The Vastness of Complex Humanity in the Autobiography, the Poetry Book and the Children's Stories" *In the World of Abdelwahab Elmessiri*. Cairo: El-Shorouk Bookshop, 2004. (in Arabic)

<sup>2</sup> Some of Elmessiri's well-read books are *The End of History: an Introduction to the Structure of Zionist Thought* (1972), *The Problematic of Epistemological Bias*(1992), and *Zionism, Nazism, and the End of History* (1996).

<sup>3</sup> *Intellectual Journey* PP.506-507

<sup>4</sup> P.4

<sup>5</sup>P.1.

Finishing the *Encyclopedia*, which ended up over two million words long, I had to follow a rigid system. This led me to neglect many aspects of my life, and my social life in particular shrivelled, which would sometimes cause me sadness. I would wake up early in the morning, before six a.m., and start writing. And I would continue writing until midnight, stopping only to eat or rest for an hour in the afternoon. I would stick to this gruelling timetable for ten days or more at a time.<sup>1</sup>

After completing the encyclopedia which took him about twenty five years to finish, Elmessiri kept following the same rigid routine and "grueling timetable" of a devoted writer. Just like Said, Elmessiri always found solace in his love of writing which served as some kind of testimony for what he was and what he believed in.

### ***Naming the remedy: The title of autobiographies***

The titles of the memoirs/autobiographies at hand are indicative of the challenges met by the two scholars and how writing was employed to defeat such challenges. The title of Said's work, *Out of Place*, unmistakably reflects a state of deep alienation and displacement and probably alludes as well to the need for confession about how and why Said felt out of place for his whole life. In the preface to his memoirs, Said accounts for the choice of the title "*Out of Place*." On visiting his native country (Palestine), he was asked by the Israeli officials at the checkpoint whether he had any relatives there. The question caused a lot of Said's thoughts to surf up from the unconscious to the conscious. He then realized that "by the early spring of 1948 (his) entire extended family had been swept out of the place."<sup>2</sup> The phrase "out of place" recurred in Said's autobiography no less than ten times, only revealing Said's deep sense of displacement. He sadly wonders at the end of part I of his autobiography: "could 'Edward's position ever be anything but out of place?'"<sup>3</sup> The term 'memoir' in the subtitle indicates that what we have here is not a typical, all-encompassing

---

<sup>1</sup> P.399

<sup>2</sup> P.XIV

<sup>3</sup> P.19

Paradoxically, Huda El-Akkad contends that "although he gave his memoir the title *Out of Place*, Said is considered by many followers in place 'The west and the rest' claim him as a citizen. He could impose his postcolonial discourse on western academic fields."(P.294).

autobiography but a selective recollection of particular happenings. As indicated earlier, Said focuses in his memoir on his formative years in Cairo and Palestine and on his college years in the United States. There is no detailed account of later stages in his life in which he produced the bulk of his work as an intellectual, but only a brief account given hastily towards the end about his writings and his disease.

The title of Elmessiri's autobiography; *Rehlaty Al Fikriyah (My Intellectual Journey)* highlights the idea of journeying and progression. Elmessiri points out in the introduction of his autobiography: "This book describes my intellectual odyssey in terms of the recurring themes of both my life and my work, free of the constraints of a linear time frame."<sup>1</sup> The theme of the 'journey' is a common theme in literature that is related to exploration and experimentation, and by directly referring to it in the title, the author openly invites his readers to perceive his life journey as a prolonged process of discovery. The term "intellectual" in Elmessiri's title points to the fact that the autobiography focuses on the 'intellectual' voyaging rather than the 'personal' voyaging . It is rather curious as well that the autobiography has two subtitles. Through the subtitle, "*Fi al Gozoor wa al Bozoor wa al Thamar*" (*of Seeds, Roots and Fruits*), Elmessiri traces his intellectual development in his formative years in Damanhour and asserts his being rooted in the Arab Islamic culture.<sup>2</sup> The second subtitle of Elmessiri's autobiography "*Sira Ghayr Zatiyah Ghayr Mawdw`iyah*" (*A Non-objective, Non-subjective Autobiography*) is an interesting title as it works through negation rather than affirmation. It wouldn't have made sense unless the reader is informed in the preface that Elmessiri consciously wishes to avoid the sharp polarity of 'subjectivity' versus 'objectivity', which he repeatedly dismissed as one characteristic of Western modernity. He elucidates:

If this intellectual autobiography is non-subjective, it is also non-objective. It is the autobiography of a man in whose life the private and the public, the particular and the general, converge. That is why abstract intellectual issues are not discussed in isolation, but are always placed within the context of concrete events from my life, or accompanied by

---

<sup>1</sup> P.2

<sup>2</sup> The subtitle "of Seeds, Roots and Fruits" has been removed from the English edition by the British editor for fear it would be misclassified in libraries as botany!

quotations from my works, so as to illustrate how the (general) intellectual issue was translated into specific phenomena in my own (particular) personal life.<sup>1</sup>

Only by placing the details of Elmessiri's personal life within the broader intellectual context that both the 'personal' and the 'intellectual' yield meaning. This is different from Edward Said's approach as he candidly classifies his autobiography as a 'subjective' autobiography. He writes in the preface to his autobiography that he decided to write this memoir as an account of "the life I lived in the Arab world, where I was born and spent my formative years, and in the United States, where I went to school, college, and university."<sup>2</sup>

### ***Persona and perspective: Who tells the stories of the wounded?***

James Goodwin maintains that "the representation of self and identity through language, the linguistic property of discourse, is in autobiography constituted through the methods of narration and description."<sup>3</sup> Like novels and short stories, autobiographies are all made of 'narration' and 'description', yet what truly distinguishes autobiographies from other genres is 'reflection'. It is therefore rather tempting in an analysis of autobiographies to start by identifying the person/*persona* speaking, describing scenes and narrating events. The perspective of the person/*persona* and the amount of objectivity involved would vary from one writer to another. To start with, Autobiographies are subjective by definition, and the perspective in autobiographies/memoirs is necessarily that of the author. Yet since autobiography is after all a literary genre, we should think of the speaker in autobiographies as a '*persona*' rather than a 'person', something which would set some distance between the autobiographer and the stories he is telling. This is a hazardous venture, though. Paul Eakin in *How Our lives Become Stories* (1999) is inclined to think of the "self" that appears in autobiography "less as an entity and more as a kind of awareness in process."<sup>4</sup> In other words, in the case of autobiography, the *persona* speaking there tangibly differs from the one that appears in fiction, for instance, as autobiography could not be simply classified as art, but rather a true-to-life art. Eakin concludes that

---

<sup>1</sup> P.3

<sup>2</sup> *OP.* xiii

<sup>3</sup> Goodwin 17

<sup>4</sup> p. x

the self that appears in autobiographies is not “given, monolithic, and invariant, but dynamic, changing, and plural.”<sup>1</sup> It is a self that could be wearing one mask or more or that might have a different reality than the one it claims.

The selves represented in the two autobiographies are anything but “given, monolithic, and invariant”, to use Eakin's words. The 'self' in Said's memoir is certainly a “dynamic” self in progress, a self that toils to find itself a place between two worlds; the Arab world and the Western world. El-Akkad asserts that “Said's quest is the struggle of a soul that attempts to create from personal suffering a global language that employs tools of western postmodernism to introduce the counter-discourse of the exiled and oppressed.”<sup>2</sup> In other word, in spite of the subjectivity of Said's experience, it has a wider significance for him and for his audience. In his memoirs; hence, Said speaks in the first person in an attempt to represent the “dynamic” and “changing” developments he found himself subject to. Said's philosophical and cultural stance was further discussed by El-Akkad who focused on the identity crisis Said's “plural” self has suffered. El-Akkad calls Said “the sensitive exiled son of ‘the Arab world’, who suffers alienation from his native land and estrangement in the West,”<sup>3</sup> . She believes that throughout his life journey Said “tries to invent for himself a cultural identity that recognizes the impact of his native cultural identity and that of Western culture”<sup>4</sup>. That is why his concept of 'self' keeps changing in different phases of his life as represented in the memoir. The perspective of the child at the beginnings of the memoir differs from that of the teenager roaming the streets of Cairo or visiting the small towns of Lebanon, or the young man arriving at the United States for the first time and discovering how others see him. It also definitely differs from the perspective of the older Said in the very last pages of *Out of Place* being informed of his terminal disease. So, much in accordance with what Eakin believes, Said does not think of himself as possessing a single personality/*persona* . Instead, he declares in his memoir: "I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance." <sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> p. xi

<sup>2</sup> P.295

<sup>3</sup> El-Akkad 293

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> OP 295

Elmessiri's autobiography is entirely at odds with that of Said in this respect. In the introduction to his autobiography bearing the subtitle of “a non-subjective non-objective autobiography”, Elmessiri clearly distinguishes between the 'person' and the '*persona*'. Thus, at times it is Elmessiri as a 'person' speaking, whereas at other times the '*persona*' speaking distances the author from the stories he is telling. This is particularly evident in the parts dedicated to the explanation of Western modernism, Zionism and Arab-Israeli struggle where the interference of the personal is kept to the minimum. Reflecting on the issue, Elmessiri indicates that his primary purpose of writing this autobiography was not simply to narrate the events of his personal life, as much as it was to provide others; especially younger generations, with a concrete example of how the life of a son of a merchant would culminate into the making of an Arab intellectual. He maintains: “There is a great need now for precisely this sort of writing, since the growing gap between generations hampers the process of passing on wisdom and knowledge down the ages. Indeed, I often fear the coming generations may be condemned to start again from point zero.”<sup>1</sup>

Like in all autobiographies, Elmessiri narrates some intimately personal events and anecdotes like how he used to behave as young boy and the children's games he used to play, what his mother used to cook, how he met his future wife, the toys he used to buy his children, how he behaved during his illness, etc. Still, what is so impressive about Elmessiri's autobiography is that in spite of being inevitably subjective, it can at times take an objective turn, chronicling for social transformations, historical/political events and expounding theories. When it does, it can well serve as illustrative of the alterations that came about the Arab *intelligencia* of the sixties. Elmessiri is not definite whether this is a plus or a minus, but it surely reflects the rationale behind his writings:

I do not know whether this non-subjective non-objective autobiography which I have essayed constitutes a new literary genre, an old literary genre, a literary genre that is at once both old and new, or a fusion of literary and non-literary genres. I prefer to leave such matters to my readers and critics<sup>2</sup>.

### ***The technique of the two autobiographies: Structure and tone***

---

<sup>1</sup> P.6

<sup>2</sup> P.6

The two autobiographies do not have much in common as far as technique is concerned. In autobiographies/memoirs, structure varies from the linear/chronological to the thematic and from the organic/closed structure to the inorganic/open-ended structure. Whereas linearity and organicity are common in autobiographies, a memoir is not necessarily linear and is usually inorganic since it extracts part(s) of the story rather than the whole story. Estelle Jelinek maintains that

although most critics no longer expect autobiographies to adhere stylistically to a precise progressive narrative, nonetheless a unified shaping is considered ideal. That unity should be achieved by concentrating on one period of the autobiographer's life, the development of his life according to one theme, or the analysis of his character in terms of an important aspect of it<sup>1</sup>.

Whereas the structure of Said's autobiography is linear, the structure of Elmessiri's autobiography is a mixture of the chronological and the thematic. The events in Elmessiri's autobiography are arranged chronologically. First, it begins with stories of family and of early childhood (Edenic myth); then comes the phase of youth that witnessed the author's intellectual development (pilgrimage and conversion); and finally the phase of intellectual maturity that witnessed the publication of his most significant works (confession). On a parallel scheme, however, Elmessiri's autobiography is also thematic in the sense that it is organized around a number of themes which monitor the most significant moments in Elmessiri's intellectual journeying. Elmessiri elaborates on the rationale behind using this intermixture of the chronological and the thematic:

The act of writing implies a process of selection, omission, marginalization and retention dictated by the specific paradigm chosen by the author. The alternative would be to treat the reader to an integral rendition of all the minutiae of my life, without interpretation or order, leaving him to drown in a sea of disconnected details whose meaning he cannot hope to fathom.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> P.5

<sup>2</sup> P.2

Said's work, arranged chronologically as it is, remains incomplete. As Stathis Gourgouris points out, "the memoir strove to map a network of beginnings, and hardly to account for a totality of life from some endpoint of thought."<sup>1</sup> What accounts for this missing sense of totality is that Edward Said began writing his memories in 1994 with a sense of urgency after he was diagnosed with Leukaemia. Out of the two works under study, Said's is the least conclusive since it abruptly ends with an account of his Leukaemia experience without giving the reader a full account of his productive years as an intellectual. Yet, though in Said's memoir readers are introduced to incomplete fragments of the author's life, and though characters appear and disappear like flashes of light in the darkness, the stories, the events, and the episodes flow smoothly throughout the book just like those in Elmessiri's autobiography.

The tone of the two autobiographies varies as well. One might ask which is more therapeutic, a serious tone or a light-hearted one? Intellectuals are often falsely stereotyped as being sober all the way. Using the serious, know-all tone could be more suitable for the act of confession as it adds credibility to what is said. Nevertheless, an ironical tone might hint at some emotional detachment that helps the traumatized re-visit problematic issues and long buried tales, and eventually achieve the needed therapeutic effect. Said often resorts to such an ironical tone to satirize his family and the so-many contradictions of the society he lived in. He explains why he would use a satirical tone by stating that it helps "highlight the artificial quality of what we were, a family determined to make itself into a mock little European group despite the Egyptian and Arab surroundings that are only hinted at as an occasional camel, gardener, servant, palm tree, pyramid, or tarbushed chauffeur"<sup>2</sup>. The ironical tone is used to describe and criticize both the narrator and other people he knew: "I hope it is also clear that both as narrator and as character, I have consciously not spared myself the same ironies or embarrassing recitals"<sup>3</sup>.

In his autobiography Elmessiri describes how his love of satire and joking developed at an early age because of the children's games he used to participate in:

---

<sup>1</sup> P.37

<sup>2</sup> OP 75

<sup>3</sup> preface xvii

The love of joking, however, has remained with me, and I have warned all my friends that if I crack jokes at their expense, my excuse is that I am Egyptian. I love all forms of witticism, and find any opportunity for a “*Qafiya*” irresistible. When the spirit is upon me, my devotion to jokes overrides all other commitments for as long as it lasts. Indeed, I believe that love of joking forms part of the core of every Egyptian. An Egyptian will immediately take to anyone who knows how to crack a joke<sup>1</sup>.

Yet, known as he was for having a sense of humour, Elmessiri rather adopted a serious contemplative tone for most parts of his autobiography. In some parts, however, he used sarcasm; at times self-sarcasm. One example is when he describes how his self-concept started to formulate as a young boy:

My mother told me that when I was about three or four years old, they found me on the large veranda overlooking the garden of our house, walking back and forward. I was wearing the frames of an old pair of glasses that had lost their lenses, and in my mouth was a paper rolled up in the form of a cigarette. I would hold the cigarette in one hand and keep my other hand behind my back while I paced back and forth very earnestly. When I was asked what I was doing, I answered that I had decided to be a “doctor”<sup>2</sup>.

The use of irony and sarcasm, Elmessiri believes, helps to create some sort of emotional detachment between the speaker and the events he is narrating, hence adding to his analytical capabilities.

It must be noted that in his memoir, Said, who alternates between being serious and being ironical, proclaims that his aim is to bring together old days and current events since he felt: “the need to bridge the sheer distance in time and place between my life today and my life then”(xvi). Such a comparison that he draws between the past and the present generates “a certain detachment and irony of attitude and tone.”<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Elmessiri's obstinate faith in God and his relentless belief in man render his tone hopeful and optimistic throughout. He writes in his autobiography:

---

<sup>1</sup> p 28-29

<sup>2</sup> p.72-73

<sup>3</sup> p.xvi

"My self-confidence is, in the end, simply confidence in man and in his ability to transcend his self, to reform and transform himself, and to know his limits. It is a confidence that does not breed personal conceit and vanity, but instead produces pride in man in general and in his abilities, and a continuous optimism regarding the future"<sup>1</sup>.

This optimistic attitude endowed Elmessiri with the stamina much needed in moments of despair, especially during his terminal disease.

### ***Language: The healing medium***

For many writers, especially those who have experienced a good deal of life hardships, language serves as the redeeming factor and the healing medium that helps the bottled-in emotions of the writer to come out in a creative form. The following discussion underscores the views of the two intellectuals regarding 'language' as such and the logic behind the choices the autobiographers made concerning the language they use in writing their autobiographies.

Edward Said, fluent in both English and Arabic to the extent that he never knew which is his native tongue, sometimes went through the dilemma of whether to write in the former or the latter. Said stated on more than one occasion that he does not feel comfortable writing in Arabic but the question itself reminded him of the split identity he had. In the preface to his memoir he illustrates how his views concerning language are related to the split-identity problem he suffered from:

The basic split in my life was the one between Arabic, my native language, and English, the language of my education and subsequent expression as a scholar and teacher, and so trying to produce a narrative of one in the language of the other – to say nothing of the numerous ways in which the languages were mixed up for me and crossed over from one realm to the other – has been a complicated task<sup>2</sup>.

One reason for the predicament Said used to have as a child is that Arabic was looked down upon as the language of the colonized, whereas English was regarded as the language of the colonizer. Said narrates how they were somehow driven as children to despise Arabic, yet speaking Arabic turned gradually into an act of resistance:

---

<sup>1</sup> P. 506

<sup>2</sup> OP xv- xvi

A little pamphlet entitled *The School Handbook* immediately turned us into "natives". Rule I stated categorically: "English is the language of the school. Anyone caught speaking other languages will be severely punished". So Arabic became our haven, a criminalized discourse where we took refuge from the world of masters and complicit prefects and anglicized older boys who lorded it over us as enforcers of the hierarchy and its rules. Because of Rule I we spoke more, rather than less, Arabic, as an act of defiance against what seemed then, and seems even more so now, an arbitrary, ludicrously gratuitous symbol of their power.<sup>1</sup>

The problem reiterated as Said has to decide on which language to use in writing his memoirs. The reason why this might be a problem is that writing a book in Arabic usually means confining it within the limits of the Arab world - unless it gets translated later. Said's thoughts were that "Arabic is unfamiliar in the west and belongs to a tradition and civilization usually both misunderstood and maligned. Everything we write about ourselves, therefore, is an interpretive translation – of our language, our experience, our senses of self and others." He therefore came to the conclusion that if he wished to address the majority of his readers he should write his autobiography in English. In other words, Said finally decided to think like an Arab and to use English to address the 'Other'. It is as if the two parts of Said's identity are at last reconciled.

Elmessiri, who developed a special interest in 'signification' as a theoretical problematic, postulates a link between the use of language and one's world outlook<sup>2</sup>. It is only through religious faith, argues Elmessiri, that the 'signifier' refers to the 'signified' and the indeterminacies characteristic of modern language are abridged. Communication through language, that is, the ability of one individual to communicate with another individual through language, implies that they share a certain common humanity, and a faith in the ability to convey their meanings to another. He believed that "the whole human project depends on language as a means of communication between people,

---

<sup>1</sup> OP 184

<sup>2</sup> Elmessiri expounded most of his views regarding the problematic of language in *Al lughah wa Al majaz (Language and Metaphor)* (2006) where he links the problematic of language to the dualism of immanence versus transcendence; one of his key research interest.

with the goal of accumulating experience based on interaction with nature so that every new human subject does not have to start learning the world all over again from zero."<sup>1</sup> In other words, for Elmessiri, language is not only communicative but it is also educative as it enhances the cognitive processes taking place inside the human mind.

Unlike Said, Elmessiri wrote his autobiography in Arabic (only later to get translated into English). For Elmessiri, Arabic is the healing medium for Arab intellectuals, since it is an identifier of Arab and Islamic identity. While studying for his PhD in the United States, Elmessiri managed to perfect the English language, much needed at the time for passing his university exams, let alone for survival. Yet when he came back to Egypt, and upon mingling with the upper class bourgeoisie and with some academic circles in Egypt who were keen to shift to English in their informal conversations, not out of necessity but as a sign of social status, he became even more conscious of the dissonance in Arab identity that showed through code switching. In his autobiography Elmessiri laments such identity crisis that many Arabs suffer from: "Indeed, it was a matter of extreme sorrow for me to see all those people living in our country, some of whom had never travelled outside it, and who yet knew nothing about their land, and could not even speak its language!"<sup>2</sup> In spite of being a professor the English Language and Literature Department in the Faculty of Arts, Elmessiri criticized European language departments in more than one context for adopting both the language and the world outlook of the 'Other'. He argues that "The result is a total denial of self which diminishes our creativity as we try, consciously or unconsciously, to divorce ourselves from our cultural identity, our inherited Arab and/or Islamic knowledge, and from any methods of interpretation connected to this identity or knowledge. This separation is an ultimate act of suppression of identity, and achieving it exhausts a large amount of a person's energy"<sup>3</sup>. In this respect, the theories of both Said and Elmessiri regarding the role of language as an identity indicator are quite similar.

### *Of Autobiography and Autobiographers: Final notes*

---

<sup>1</sup> P.473

<sup>2</sup>P.83

<sup>3</sup> *My Intellectual Journey* P.86

This paper relates the act of writing an autobiography to the therapeutic practice of using writing as a healing activity for those suffering from traumatic psychological disorder or simply for elderly people wishing to present a confession about their lives. More importantly, the argument of this paper is that autobiography particularly works as scriptotherapy in the case of intellectuals who are usually in full mastery of language as a medium and who are commonly capable of self-reflection. Two autobiographies/memoirs written by two prominent intellectuals were selected for the purpose of this study: *Edward Said's Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999), and Abdelwahab Elmessiri's *Rehlaty Al Fikriyah (My Intellectual Journey)* (2006). The autobiographies/memoirs of Edward Said and Abdelwahab Elmessiri reflect the personal and intellectual development of two intellectuals. As indicated earlier, probably none of the two intellectuals have been through what might be labeled as a typical traumatic experience. Both intellectuals experienced a life journey that could be characterized as 'agonizing', yet they were at the same time blessed with a life rich in experiences and transformations. Their agonies ranged from enduring a deformed figure, an inconvenient family life, a split identity, a political struggle, a religious dilemma , or a terminal disease.

The most significant thematic and technical aspects of the two autobiographies were analyzed to explore how both intellectuals' concept of 'self', 'life' and 'writing' was reflected in their autobiographies, and how this could have worked as a therapy for their toiling selves. In spite of the different cultural backgrounds they have, it is writing that probably helped these intellectuals survive the life hardships they confronted. This is one of the "pro-health functions of writing" in Soroko's terms as mentioned earlier<sup>1</sup>. For Edward Said 'writing' was a means to help put his disseminated 'self' back together and re-assemble the varied components of his identity at odd with each other. Similarly, one reason Elmessiri wrote his many books and encyclopedias was to relieve the many personal and intellectual anxieties he was subject to and the various dilemmas he had to resolve. In the case of the two intellectuals, testimonial writing granted the space needed for the 'self' to contemplate its own identity and to reflect on its journeying through life, re-experiencing vitality, re-considering life choices and most of all get relieved of the grave burden of having a confession to tell.

---

<sup>1</sup> P. 23

### Works Cited

- Aboul-ela, Hossam (2006). "Edward Said's *Out of Place: Criticism: Polemic, and Arab American Identity*" *MELUS*, Vol. 31, no. 4 (Winter)
- Ali, Haggag (2011). "Modernity in the Discourse of Abdelwahab Elmessiri". *Intellectual Discourse*. Vol.19, PP.71-96.  
<http://search.proquest.com/> April 23rd 2016.
- Ali, Tariq (2006). *Conversations with Edward Said*. New York: University of Chicago Press.
- Allport, G. W. (1942). *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science*. New York: Social Science Research Council.
- Robbins, Bruce (2007). "Gatekeeping" *Raritan*; Summer, 1 Jan. p. 46. ProQuest Research Library. <http://search.proquest.com/> May 7th 2016.
- Buttigieg , Joseph A. (2004, January). "Edward Said, 1935–2003". *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*. Routledge. Vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 1-6.  
<http://search.proquest.com/>. 10 Jun. 2015
- Caruth, Cathy (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. U.S.A: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Eakin, Paul John (1999). *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. United States: Cornell University press.
- Egan, Susanna (1984). *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography*, United States: University of North Carolina Press.
- El-Akkad, Huda (2002). "Confronting Western Culture: Sons of the Arab World Theorize on Postmodernism and Globalism". In *Between Two Cultures: Essays in Literature and Language*. Mary Massoud (Ed.). Cairo: Ain Shams University.

- Elmessiri, Abdelwahab (2006). *Rehlaty Al Fikriyah: Fi al Gozoor wa al Bozoor wa al Themar: Sira Ghayr Zatiyah Ghayr Mawdw`iyah (My Intellectual Journey: of Seeds, Roots and Fruits: a Non-objective, Non-subjective Autobiography Cairo: EL Shorouk Bookstore,.(In Arabic)*. Translated by the writer (Rpt.) in *The Intellectual Journey of An Islamic Humanist: An Autobiography* (forthcoming).
- Felman, Shoshana (1995). "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching." In Cathy Caruth (Ed.). *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. U.S.A: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Gibbons, Sacha (1999). "Writing through Trauma: Ruby Langford's My Bundjalung People". *Journal of Australian Studies*. Australia: University of Queensland Press.
- Goodwin, James (1993). *Autobiography: The Self Made Text*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Gourgouris, Stathis (2007). "The Late Style of Edward Said". In Ferial Ghazoul (Ed.) *Edward Said and Critical Decolonization*. Cairo: AUC Press.
- Henke, Suzette A . (2000). *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing*. U.S.A: St. Martin's Press.  
<http://search.proquest.com/>. 15 Mar.2015.
- Hughes, Kathryn (2002, January). "Radical Chic" (Review of *The Gatekeeper: A Memoir*). *New Statesman*; Vol.14; p. 52.ProQuest Research Library. <http://search.proquest.com/> , April 23rd 2016 .
- "*In Memoriam: Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri 1938-2008*"(2008). *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, (Issue Number 3) Summer, pp. iii-iv .  
[.Jstor. Web. 6 Oct. 2015. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858548 .](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858548)
- Olney, James(1998). *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*. United

States: University of Chicago Press.

Progoff, Ira (1975). *At a Journal Workshop*. New York: Dialogue House Library.

Riordan, Richard J. (1996 Jan/Feb) "Scriptotherapy: Therapeutic Writing as a Counseling Adjunct". *Journal of Counseling & Development*. Vol. 74, no.3 , p263-69 Ebsco Host. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/>. April 25th 2016.

Said, Edward (1986). *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (photographs by Jean Mohr) London: Faber and Faber.

— — — (1999). *Out of Place: A Memoir*. London: Granta Books.

Salaita, Steven (2004) "Eulogizing Edward Said". *Minnesota Review*, Duke University Press,( Numbers 61-62), Spring-Summer (New Series). pp. 247-51. Project Muse. Web. 10 Jun 2015.

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mnr/summary/v061/61.salaita.html>.,

Soroko, Emilia (2012) "Beneficial effects of writing and narration in the context of a traumatic experience". In D. Kubacka-Jasiecka, M. Kuleta, (Eds.), *Reflections on psychological mechanisms of trauma and posttraumatic development*. KrakÓw: Krakowska Oficyna Naukowa TEKST, 215-241.