

Writing Um Said: Representation of Motherhood in Edward Said's *Out of Place*

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I chose to read Edward Said's memoir *Out of Place* expecting to find an alternative history of Palestine from one of the most ferocious fighters for the Palestinian cause. I did not find much of Palestine, but I did read an intimate narrative of an Arab boy's coming of age. Said's focus on his family was a deliberate opening up of the structure of the Arab household, as he attests in the preface to the Arabic translation of the book. This gesture resonated deeply with my own feminist political position on existing family structures as oppressive units that attempt to control and undermine women's roles in society. Said's focus on his gendered identity in *Out of Place* nuanced my understanding of the hegemonic structure of the institutions of patriarchy, and I came to see that patriarchy could be equally dislocating to its male subjects as it is for women. In this paper, I will limit my analysis of Said's attack on patriarchy by discussing his representation of his mother. Through such an examination of the character of Hilda, I attempt to delineate Said's ambivalent relationship towards feminist politics. Such ambivalence is well documented by many feminist readers of Said, such as Gayatri Spivak (1982), Leela Gandhi (1998), and Susan Fraiman (1995), among others. This memoir marks the only serious and detailed examination of gender issues by Said in his entire oeuvre; it thus provides the reader with an opportunity to analyze in detail Said's position vis-à-vis feminism. His representation of his mother reveals the deep paradoxes and troubled relationship that Said has primarily with her but also with feminism. In the following reading, I aim to argue that although Said inches *close to* an understanding of the otherness of his mother in the household, this closeness fails to translate into *political alliance* with her against patriarchal authority.

As the memoir clearly articulates, Hilda's lonely struggle within a household and society forbade her any role but that of mother and wife. She pours all her energies and love into her children (especially Edward), who become her mode of expression. The memoir is in some sense a way for Said to communicate with his mother, to fuse with her, to understand her motives, to re-emphasize the impact she had on his life, as well as to rid himself of her destructive force; in other words, to start a dialogic relationship with her.

Said's presentation of Hilda's confinement in her assigned roles does not neglect to locate her own utterances within the memoir. The boundaries of identity within which she moves, be it as wife or mother, do not fully succeed in muting her voice. The

strong ties she forms with Edward, despite the father's disapproval, interfere with the construction of a hyper masculine identity that his father aimed at. Hilda's lack of interest in Edward's sports activities, coupled to her discomfort with her son's sexuality, contradict her husband's motivations, even if at times there seems to be an intersection in the method of execution. The masturbation scene, where Edward finds his secret sexual life exposed by his parents, takes on different meanings for his father and mother. Wadie, barging into Edward's room with pajamas in his hand, and his mother following closely at his heel is described by Said in the following way:

When he was half way into the room, just as he began to speak, I saw my mother's drawn face framed in the doorway several feet behind him. She said nothing but was present to give emotional weight to his prosecution of the case. "Your mother and I have noticed" – here he waved the pajama – "that you haven't had any wet dreams. That means you are abusing yourself ..." Although I knew in my heart that she sympathized with me most of the time, she rarely broke ranks with him. Now I couldn't detect any support at all; just a shyly questioning look, as if to say: "Yes, Edward, what are you doing?" Plus a little bit of "Why do you do nasty things to hurt us?" (Said, 1999, pp. 72-73)

That both parents found the act repulsive and requiring immediate action looks on the surface as stemming from a unified patriarchal discourse. But on the contrary, father and mother are motivated by different and opposing ideologies. The father's motivation is the belief that if his son does not "abuse" himself, his sexual prowess will increase, and his virility will become more prominent. Hilda, on the other hand, finds in the act a threat to her sexuality, where the confrontation with her son's phallus requires her intervention to mute the masculinity of the act. Her husband's obliteration of her sexual pleasure triggers in her a disgust of sexual activity of any kind. Sexual desire, for Hilda, is masculine through and through, never to be discussed, but silently endured in a marriage. Hilda finds in motherhood a space to resist the imposed sexuality of her husband. Her realization that she needed to keep her intelligence hidden (Said, 1999, p. 173), forced Hilda to subvert her position as mother by expressing her dissatisfaction through Edward – "I became her instrument for self-expression and self-elaboration as she struggled against my father's unbending, mostly silent iron will" (p. 222). Her biggest feminist achievement was her construction of an idiosyncratic masculinity in her son – a marginal masculinity that is unsure of itself, that repeatedly questions itself and is hitherto dialogic – which resulted in the exile of Edward from his own skin. Said's adoption of a dislocated masculine voice (a voice that does not conform to ideals of heteronormativity) is a celebration of her efforts, where he attempts to comprehend and empathize with her historical moment. However, Said's alliance with his mother is ultimately limited and confined within a patriarchal discourse on motherhood that attempts to contain Hilda within its representational boundaries.

Said (1999) describes the relationships that Hilda fostered with her children as "bilateral relationships ... as *colony to metropole*, a constellation only she could see as a whole" (p.60) (my emphasis). Considering Said's life work and his relationship to the metropole, this kind of statement reveals the latent, but ambivalent aggression Said felt toward his mother. The historical context of Hilda that Said supplied us with portrays a strong willed and gifted woman whose life was violently reduced to the role of housewife and

mother as a result of social and historical constructions of womanhood at the time. As I have been claiming so far, this memoir is a celebration of Hilda's efforts to fight back to better her lot, an attempt to rescue herself from the clutches of the patriarch and to open up a space to assert her voice – a gesture that is nostalgic in its attempt to relive those moments of bliss that Edward felt in the presence of his mother. A month after Said was diagnosed with leukemia he found himself “in the middle of a letter [he] was writing to [his] mother, who had been dead for a year and a half.” Said (1999) writes: “the urge to communicate with her overcame the factual reality of her death, which in mid sentence stopped my fanciful urge, leaving me slightly disoriented, even embarrassed. A vague narrative impulse seemed to be stirring inside me” (p. 215). The threat of cancer that forces Said to confront the frailty of his physicality and the base materialism of his body triggers in him this nostalgia for the soothing embrace of his mother. The act of narration is Said's way to contain the invasion of cancer that has taken over his body, by returning to the moment when he felt a similar bodily invasion in the form of parental surveillance and control. His longing for his mother is in fact a longing for a stable selfhood that can be traced back to the symbiotic state he had with her. The ideal that his mother set for Edward was Eduardo Bianco, the perfect son whose “purity” of character she desired. The impossibility of this longing for a stable self is compensated for in the narrative through Said's assertion of an autobiographical self, of his own construction, that somehow redeems Edward through the writer's own exercise of agency. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Said finds himself writing a letter to his mother at his discovery of cancer – an incident that instigates the writing of this memoir – for only through his conscious and selective representation of the mother can he control the outcomes of the autobiographical self that ensues.

From the outset of the book, Hilda serves as a narrative setting for the development of young Edward. Hilda's “infinitely maternal atmosphere” translated the intimacy that he shared with her into soft spoken Arabic idioms that she delivered, like a “dreamily seductive” siren that could as easily withhold her charms (Said, 1999, p. 4). Even when she spoke to him – more formally and objectively – in English her atmospheric quality was unchanged, her voice continuing to haunt Said as he writes his memoir. “Edward, the word wafting through the dusk air ... and of myself ... enjoying the pleasure of being called, being wanted, the non-Edward part of myself taking luxurious respite by not answering until the silence of my being became unendurable” (Said, 1999, p. 4). Said sets the parameters of representation of his mother: where on the one hand she is intertwined with the dusk air of a café in Cairo, and on the other hand she defines who Edward is and who he should become. Said's (1999) description of his mother as not “a simple refuge, or a kind of intermittent safe haven” (p. 13), because of the paradoxical nature of her character, creates an ambivalent reality for Edward, where his need to contain his mother within the metaphor of space is continuously challenged by the force of her subjecthood. The contingency of the spatial metaphor as a necessary component for the development of the persona of that non-Edward part of himself is a compulsory attempt to contain the extremely volatile and complex relationship he has with her. The extravagant brush strokes that are used to paint Hilda pour forth their excesses to portray a character whose awful beauty inches closer to Shakespeare's Gertrude, where Said attempts to mute the socio-historical frame of his mother's moment. This baroque portrayal reiterates the oscillating representation of Hilda from the possessor of a “sun-like smile,” whose “uncomplicated,” “gifted,” and “loving” character is contrasted

with the deepest ambivalence and frugality of affection that produced in Edward a “metaphysical panic” and “even terror” (Said, 1999, p. 13). As Noha Bayoumi (2003) observes, Said uses the memoir as a method to deconstruct their complicated relationship and liberate himself of her clutches. Yet, at her most loving, Hilda becomes a refuge where her subjecthood is replaced by the spatial metaphor. Only through her awfulness and manipulations can Hilda rise above this metaphor and assert her own personhood. Thus the ideal of the mother – the infinitely giving, loving shelter – that Edward expects Hilda to live up to and that she constantly undermines by the force of her character, is no more than Said’s attempted strategy of containment.

The spatial metaphor of the mother that Said longingly refers to thus remains within a patriarchal discourse, where the mother is not simply the primary figure in the household. As Gilbert and Gubar (1979) observe on the representation of women by male authors, she has also “been described or imagined as [a] house” (p. 88). Hilda’s “unimpeded, extremely sudden, and unannounced entrances into [Edward’s] room” (Said, 1999, p. 31), are a manifestation of her access and domination of her son’s selfhood. That he is male (and therefore of an opposite sex to the mother), however, inhibited any sense of symbiotic relationship that is emblematic of mother-daughter relationships.¹ Hilda’s access into Said’s interiority can be read precisely in the metaphor of metropole that he uses to describe her: a dominating power that invades and others the colonized son. Thus, the spatial metaphor is a necessary survival tactic for the development of Edward’s identity because it empties his internal space from the mother and pushes her back into the external foundations of the household. In other words, it bars the mother from the sudden access into the room, and hence the private self, by transforming her into the room itself, then masking the whole metaphorical construction by characterizing the ideal mother as a safe haven. The configuration of this battle to reclaim a space and sense of self organizes the structure of the narrative in such a way that Said writes Edward as an exile within the household.

Edward’s banishment to the United States at the hands of his father exiled him from his mother’s nest. Said clearly blames, and does not fully forgive, his father for this act. The recuperation of their bond – as Said attempts to persuade the reader – conquers the father’s severe scheme of separating them. Paradoxically, Said also places his mother at the center of the text in order to render himself exilic in the Saidian sense of the word. The process of fragmentation that Edward’s body was subjected to at the hands of his mother and that undermined his sense of self was the earlier, and more dislocating, banishment that he underwent, where Said’s narrative persona attempts to transform Edward’s desolate loneliness into an *exilic* position of resistance and containment of the mother’s effects on him. “It was through my mother that my awareness of my body as incredibly fraught and problematic developed” (Said, 1999, p. 61) And as Said (1999) continues, his mother’s relationship to his body was characterized by a “radical ambivalence [that] expressed itself in her extraordinary physical embrace ... and at the same time offering a great deal of negative commentary on [his] appearance” (p. 61). The process of fragmentation that Edward underwent due to Hilda’s intimate surveillance of her son’s body (manifesting itself in words of praise and condemnation) had devastating effects on Edward’s acquisition of heteronormative masculinity. The narrative repetition of the scrutiny he was subjected to in all its excruciating detail for the benefit of the reader brings to mind women’s perceptions of their own bodies as controlled and

1. See Chodorow’s psychoanalytic discussion of mother-son relationship pp. 92-110.

2. See for example Grosz’s (1994) observations on the almost maniacal surveillance of their bodies that women endure and its relation to gender identity.

inscribed within the defining paradigm of authority.² Edward's wish to be disembodied and turn into a book is a profoundly evocative remark on the power of narration in countering the devastation of a fragmented and imprisoned body. Thus, Said turns this power against his mother's corrective approach by maintaining the autobiographical self at the margins of the memoir, where, as Anne Bernard (2005) observed, Hilda is located at the center of the narrative (p. 18). Said struggles for a definitive separation from his mother who occupies the center of the narrative by reassembling a sense of self through his marginalization in his autobiography. Said's assertion of an effeminate Edward is a method that transforms his weakness not only to challenge his father's authority but also, and perhaps more importantly, to usurp the authority of his mother.

Hilda's power to design the parameters of Edward's identity in order to appropriate his voice and speak through him exiled him from his own body. This aspect of their relationship is further compounded by the instrumental role Hilda played in mediating Edward's relationship to his father by "supplying the justifying gloss on [Wadie's] unyielding and cold exterior" (Said, 1999, p. 73). Consequently, her key role in reproducing Edward as a heteronormative male, a productive agent of patriarchy, cannot be undermined – mother in this case is a stand-in for parental authority. On the other hand, her "pessimism" and her problematic relationship to her son stemmed from her longing for emancipation and her resentment of the hierarchy that exists between genders. Positioning his mother at the nucleus of the text where his "knowledge of himself is conditional upon his knowledge of her" (Bayoumi, 2003, p. 262), is problematic because Said posits the mother as a locus of power, when she, in fact, is constituted and dominated by the structure of power that Said attempts to undermine. Then, in other instances, he is sensitive to her resistance strategies and her dissatisfaction with her prescribed roles and he finds it his duty to "liberate" her from the clutches of the father. Thus, Said's attack on the institutions of patriarchy sometimes fails to spot the proper target or locus of power. This is why Said finds himself reconciling with his father (Said, 1999, p. 65) but does not reconcile in the same way with his mother. Furthermore, Said (1999) reproduces his father's opinions of mothers: "mothers are to be loved, he said, and taken care of unconditionally. Yet because by virtue of selfish love they can deflect children from their chosen career ... so mothers should not be allowed to get too close" (p. 7).

Thus, Said's marginalization of Edward in the memoir is contingent on his mother's focal position at the center of the narrative which embodies the problematic relationship he had with her: he is marginal because he does not conform to an Arab masculine ideal, and can thereby fight this ideal. But his placement of his mother at the center of the narrative is a representational act of latent aggression and containment of her personhood and agency. By placing Hilda at the center, Said transforms her from another character into the very fabric of the plot through which his construction of the autobiographical self takes place. As the center, she turns into a totalizing force that defines the boundaries that Edward is supposed to negotiate. Hilda's ambivalent relationship to her maternal role becomes obscured under the language of the text: because Edward's expectations of her as a safe haven are constantly undermined by the force of her character, Said imposes the spatial metaphor on her by transforming her into the context that Edward is required to navigate. However, his continuous defiance of such a placement is then interpreted as embodying the oppressive structures

of power that the text aims to dismantle. Said's deployment of exile (a term that is central to Said's theoretical contributions) to counter the dynamics of the patriarchal home, with the mother at its center, opens up the possibility to study the efficacy of exile in the gender struggle. In other words, Said's autobiographical technique with its unconventional use of exile allows the reader to question whether exile can actually transcend gender identity or whether exile remains implicated in the subject's gender. The dialogic voice that Said adopts others the conventional autobiographical self. The rigorous dialogue that the writer has with the Edward of his youth opens up the autobiographical tradition subversively by placing Edward at the margins of the narrative, a gesture that ensures the specificity of Said's experiences, while simultaneously placing his mother at the center – a center of power that imprisons Edward within the ideal of heteronormative masculinity. The mother's position in the narrative structure thus becomes confused with the symbolic notion of parents, where she comes to be perceived as an agent of patriarchy as well as a stifled subject of patriarchy that requires rescue. Through this technique³ of positioning, Said opens up a divided space in Edward that attempts to overcome his definition by his mother/parents. Said's articulation of the illness of the gendered body that exiles him from his skin in this memoir is infused with his strategic deployment of exile as a position from which to attack power. Said demonstrates that being out of place is not simply about the loss of home but more about not being allowed to develop an identity, where the household is the most intimate stifling structure of power that the individual endures. The construction of the self that ensues in this narrative is able to both represent the fragmentation of the self under an authoritarian household while at the same time attempts to rejoin the self by maintaining its marginal position. In this way, Edward's exile from his skin is solved through his marginalization in the narrative structure of the memoir. The deployment of exile as a strategic tool to face the gendered identity of his father transforms his gendered shortcomings from a stigma and position of weakness to a critical apparatus that exposes the injustices of being molded into the heteronormative masculine ideal. Said writes this memoir in an effort to resist patriarchy and unveil a masculine specificity that endures the violence of a masculine ideal, but his resistance is limited due to the representation of his mother. This representation remains problematic in its feminist possibilities because he invests in containment strategies that finally provide us with a stable, albeit idiosyncratic, autobiographical self that at times assumes monologic dominance over his mother. As I have been arguing, the specificity of the Saidian autobiographical gesture resides in his deployment of exile in the development and progress of Edward's character. The notion of exile that Said articulates in his other works is expanded here to suggest that patriarchy operates on the same exclusionary basis of group formation as nationalism.

3. By technique I mean the conflation of form and content that Walter Benjamin so brilliantly argues for.

The self that emerges, through its insistence to remain on the margins, does not posit its voice as truth while insisting at the same time to resist. His sensitive awareness of the context of his parents refuses to totally blame them for being executioners of the violence of patriarchy and honors their individual efforts to liberate themselves from inherited social notions. Moreover, by scrutinizing the different forces and currents that shaped him as an individual, he offers us an insightful critique of patriarchy in a specific historical context. The war against patriarchy in the Arab world continues to receive many blows especially with the rise of religious extremism and the Arabs' inability to construct secular democratic nations. It is in this respect that Said's memoir takes special

importance for the Arab reader. Even though his ambivalence towards his own mother is problematic as I have attempted to argue, Said's uncovering of the power dynamic within the confines of the home exposes how patriarchy can also colonize the bodies of its subjects and render them exiles on a more intimate plane.

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