

Book Reviews

Teta, Mother and Me: An Arab Woman's Memoir,

Jean Said Makdisi. London: Saqi, 2005. 424 pages.

A Feminist Autobiography

Jean Said Makdisi's *Teta, Mother and Me: An Arab Woman's Memoir* is a feminist memoir of personal inquiry and historical research. It opens with a "Prelude" which tells the story of the process of writing the book, and Jean Makdisi's concern with form and genre appears from the opening lines of the book. By pointing out the time distance between the decision to write and the act of writing, she is indirectly referring to generic issues related to memoir as a literary genre. Moreover, the "Prelude" situates Jean Makdisi's identification with her mother and grandmother (*Teta*), as well as her intention to explore and connect the lives of three generations of women in her family, which she expresses by saying: "I was going to write a loving double biography of my mother and grandmother from the vantage point of my own unsettling experiences as a modern Arab woman" (p. 9). As we read, it becomes clear that the process of producing the memoir had gone through various stages, and lived within Jean Makdisi for several years - not the months she had anticipated. Her personal narrative soon turns into a process of historical research, interpretation, and representation: "I had no idea when I began that in tracing my female ancestry I was entering the cage of history" (p. 9).

Jean Makdisi's memoir is a personal narrative which explores the experiences of three generations of women who "witnessed extraordinary and unsettling times" (p. 19), and it evolves as her own feminine experience merges with that of her mother and grandmother. In telling their stories she states her awareness of the intersections between "history" and "experience" in the following: "As I sorted out the details of *Teta's* and *Mother's* lives, tracing my consciousness through theirs, I discovered that we women had made history as much

as it had made us... The result has been for me a complex re-reading of my own life, and the lives of other women of my generation" (p. 23-24).

Teta (grandmother), who was born in 1880 in the Syrian city of Homs under the reign of the Ottoman Empire, soon found herself in Beirut where she was trained as a teacher in a British Protestant mission school (p. 18-19); and after marriage, she accompanied her husband first to Safad then Nazareth in Palestine. *Teta* lived through World War One which led to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the French and British powers, as well as World War Two which was followed by the rise of the state of Israel.

Mother seems to have inherited a life of constant instability and concomitant insecurity. She was born in Nazareth in 1914 and raised in both Palestine and Beirut where she "was formed ... by the circumstances in British Mandate Palestine and in French Mandate Lebanon" (p. 20). She then lived and raised her family in Egypt, witnessed the loss of Palestine in 1948, and moved again to Beirut; but the eruption of the Lebanese

civil war "sent her at last to die in Washington" (p. 20). *Mother* is given a direct voice in the text through Jean Makdisi's reference to the power of her mother's journal: "Mother's journal records the development of her consciousness... As she reconstructed the past, she rediscovered her mother... As I read her account of herself, I discovered someone I had never known... As I read, I saw the history of our society as it affected ... her private and individual story" (p. 247-248).

From the standpoint of a woman who has experienced "Palestine and Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s, America in the 1960s, Lebanon

beginning in the 1970s" (p. 10), Jean Makdisi, in turn, sees her life in connection to both her mother's and grandmother's lives, witnessing times of massive historical turmoil and continual displacement: born in Jerusalem in 1940, raised in Egypt under the British occupation, lived through the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, the rise of Pan-Arabism, the Suez War as well as the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. She received her college education in the United States, and then moved back to Beirut where she raised her own family and has been living there since the 1970s. Jean Makdisi again highlights the impact of history on personal experience saying:

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"Added to my own personal sense of dislocation was my family's... I was an outsider, the alienated daughter of a family dislocated once again by history" (p. 21).

Read in the light of women's autobiography theory, Jean Makdisi's connection to her mother and grandmother, as reflected in the act of memoir-writing, is marked by a sense of cross-generational continuity: "And once I saw how I was related to both, I began to write this book. We have become a family of storytellers and record-keepers" (p. 18). Generically speaking, *Teta, Mother and Me* is not a typical memoir, as it is composed of a variety of intersecting narrative forms, most prominent of which are autobiography, biography, and history. The process of memoir-construction here involves the author's reliance on her own memories, her mother's journal, family letters and photographs, as well as historical facts and documents. The writing of the memoir involves the processes of exploration, inquiry and re/construction. However, Jean Makdisi is aware of the process of writing as different from the experience of living. In her memoir, she gives voice to her mother by quoting her journal extensively, and emphasizing the fact that reflection on life experience is a discovery, while the reconstruction of the past is a rediscovery.

Preceded by a "Prelude" and followed by a "Postlude", the memoir is divided into four sections: "In My Own Time", "*Teta* in History, "Mother's World", and "Women Together: Mother and Me"; and each section in turn includes several chapters. Jean Makdisi's focus in the first section is on her own experience across time and place. At the center of "her own time" the figures of her mother and grandmother gain prominence, and hence explain her subsequent "research" and representation of their lives in connection to hers. Significantly, she concludes this section with the following statement: "At last the nuggets seemed to fuse together to form a kind of continuum, and I was able to see, instead of a chaotic series of events, the world out of which mine was formed" (p. 137).

The second section reconstructs the life-story of the grandmother against the historical background of her time. It is here that we realize the author's foremost concern with the experiences of displacement and femininity. She sheds light on the "nuggets" that create the historical background and present *Teta's* portrait. The

following section which moves to "Mother's World" is based on Mother's words, reflecting on the lives of two generations of women re-inscribed by the daughter/granddaughter. The last section of the memoir fortifies the continuum of *Teta*, Mother and Jean through the experiences of war across time, as well as the shared burden of femininity, which suggestively continues into the generation of Jean's daughters-in-law. In her "Postlude", the memoirist reflects on the process of writing the book "as a direct inquiry into my mother's, my grandmother's and my own womanhood ... I was a young woman when I began to think about this project; I am now a *Teta* to a young generation" (p. 397).

Jean Makdisi manifests her identification with her mother and grandmother, and her fear of the "inevitable marginality" imposed on women, across generations, by oppressive "domestic duties" (p. 10). The idea of the book, which started as a "biography", moves into the realm of historical research, leading Jean Makdisi to an awareness that the "world of women ... the domestic life, with all its mysteries and rituals, could not be separated from the outer life, the world of politics and armies and treaties" (p. 28). Sharing the burden of femininity is not restricted to the Arab region, but is a condition of women established by modernity. In her critique of domesticity, Jean Makdisi does not limit her perspective to the lives of Arab women across generations, but looks into the history of women living in the Arab region; and hence her exploration of the lives of the Englishwomen who taught at the British Syrian Schools in the late 19th century.

Moreover, her personal experience of living in the USA in the 1960s enlightens her as to the lives of women across time and place: "I lived the arid, claustrophobic life of prosperous American middle-class women in suburban Washington ... I learned that the differences between women are dictated more by class and occupation than by the differences between East and West" (p. 122). In the "Postlude", the author highlights her feminist consciousness and calls for a revision of the notion of womanhood from a historical and feminist perspective: "The experiences of my mother and grandmother, as well as my own, persuade me that it is the task of the women of my generation and the next to redefine our differences, and to reinterpret our place in the world" (p. 401-402).

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In her memoir, Jean Makdisi refers subtly to the power of women's self-representation. By urging her mother to write a journal, by tracing her grandmother's life and stressing the cross-generational continuum, the memoirist demonstrates her awareness of the importance of personal accounts vis-à-vis history. In her attempt to resist the marginality imposed on women, and in her effort to give voice to her mother and grandmother, Jean Makdisi retrieves them from invisibility. Thus, *Teta, Mother and Me* emerges as a feminist text: it places women center-stage; it reflects women's bondage and shared experiences; it gives women voice and retrieves them from oblivion; it highlights women's agency by revealing their hidden roles in society, and through self-representation. By telling the stories of her mother's and grandmother's lives, the memoirist inscribes her own life-story within women's history: "As I read and worked, I arrived at a complex re-reading of the condition of women, not a simplifying one. It was as though I had viewed the lives of my ancestresses through a prism, whose many sides were composed of my life, my thoughts, my views of history and feminism" (p. 397).

Thus, the "Arab Woman" who appears in the subtitle, qualifying the "Memoir", can be seen as referring to Jean, Mother and *Teta* — each independently in her own right, and furthermore as representatives of Arab women. Jean Makdisi's *Teta, Mother and Me* celebrates and testifies to women's contributions to everyday life and history. It emerges as a feminist document that rereads and rewrites the history of women; and counters the misrepresentation and stereotyping of Arab women.

Reviewed by Hala Kamal

Endnote

*Hala Kamal (PhD) is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University, Egypt, and founding member of the Women and Memory Forum (WMF) in Cairo. She currently coordinates the WMF translation project. Research interests include women's studies and autobiographical writing.