

## أقول : لماذا كتبت

### جين سعيد مقدسي

بدأت جين سعيد مقدسي بالكتابة الذاتية واتسعت كتابتها حتى ضمت النزاعات من حولها وهي تبحث عن مكانها في الوجود ومجالات ارتباطها به. وما لبثت أن فهمت أن تهميشها هو آياها تهميش المستضعفين في الأرض الذين لا صوت لهم، وهكذا فهمت أن غربتها عن الأحداث كانت غربة المرأة المستضعفة مرتين مرة لكونها مواطنة من العالم الثالث ومرة أخرى لانحصارها بالمهمات المنزلية. اكتشفت هذا بواسطة فعل الكتابة.

صار العالم بالكتابة عالمها تستجمعه، تتبناه، تأخذه لها وتأخذ فيه مكانة لها. فتحررت من الهامشية صارت تتحكم به تعرفه كما لا يعرفها. بالمفردات والجمال والأشكال الأدبية أخضعت الهلع والخوف وتحكمت بهما. حملت الكتابة جين مقدسي من عزلة لم تعرف مصدرها في البداية إلى التزام عاصف ضد الحرب والصحافة والتاريخ ومنطق العالم الجنوني. صارت جين مقدسي بالكتابة مقاومة العنف منتصرة على الخوف فاضحة الكذب.

\* راجع المقالة في لغتها الاصلية ص 129

## SPEAKING UP : WHY I WROTE

Jean Said MAKDISI

I remember the exact moment in the war when I started to write my book, *Beirut Fragments : A War Memoir* (New York : Persea Books, 1990). And I remember exactly why I did so.

It was in the summer of 1975. The fighting had begun in the spring, and had been taken up once, and then twice, and each time had subsided. One night, we had guests for dinner. I had been busy all evening, serving drinks, making sure the small dishes set in front of the guests were always full of carrots and cucumbers, or nuts ; I emptied ashtrays, before, during and after dinner ; I served the food, all of which I had cooked, pressing each guest to have a little more ; I cleared the table, having set it earlier ; I ran in and out of the kitchen a hundred times ; I checked on my little four-year-old who had a slight fever ; earlier I had seen to him and to his two older, and very mischievous, brothers ; I had taken the orders for coffee - this one with sugar, this one without ; this one black, this one white - and only when this frenzy of hospitality was done did I settle down.

I joined my husband who, sitting on the balcony, was in the middle of a conversation with one of our guests, a professor of political science at the AUB. I sat and listened for a few minutes. And then I asked a question. "I don't understand," I remember saying. "Who is fighting whom, and why ?"

The reaction to my question was instantaneous. Our guest looked

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astonished. He turned to my husband, and said, contemptuously : “Samir, What is the matter with your wife ? Where is she living ?”

Had he slapped me on the face, I would not have been as shocked, or felt as insulted, or as angry, by his response as I did. For one thing, I was not a fool ; I was neither ignorant, nor stupid ; I had earned a Bachelor’s and then a Master’s degree ; I taught at the BCW, then just renamed the BUC ; I had a deep sense of history ; I had awakened politically first to the 1948 events that had robbed my family of their roots in Palestine, and then of the 1950s triumphs of Abdel Nasser. I had in my long years in the United States, first as a student then as a young wife and mother, fought as hard as any amateur against the anti-Arab American media ; I had given lectures and written letters to the editors as well as to offending members of Congress ; I had shared, as much as anyone, in the shock and dismay following the 1967 war, and in the relief and then disappointment following the 1973 war. I had thought about and discussed the social issues in the country, though I had done so privately.

For another thing, I felt I deserved to be addressed directly, not through my husband. Our guest had compounded the injury by speaking to him, as though I was not worthy even of a direct assault, as though his comment was meant to embarrass my husband, not me.

Yet, my anger was mitigated by my recognition that there was something just in our guest’s question. What was the matter with me ? Why was I so alienated from the events around me that I felt unable to name them, to pin-point their reality ? What had intervened between Suez, my first conscious political experience, and 1975, to separate me from the world around me ?

That summer, we took an apartment in Chimlan, and it was there, as the children played outside, that I started to write. My husband was travelling, as he often did, and I was alone with the children. In the bare summer house, with no school work to worry about, with no social duties, and very little housework to do, with the children content

*Evelyne Accad*

as they ran outside for hours at a time, I had, for once in my life, plenty of time on my hands, time just to sit and think, and I started to write.

I did not at first know that I was writing a book. Nor did I start directly writing about the war. When I started, I was writing about myself, to myself. What I wrote that summer was later to become the middle chapter of my book, and then I called it a "Cultural Autobiography". Its genesis lay in what I perceived to be a life and death struggle within me to answer a question.

The question that, still smarting from that casual evening conversation on the balcony, I was raising, and trying to answer, was this : "What is my place in the world ?" It is a question which still haunts me, which I have never answered to my satisfaction, and, if we are to be honest about it, has not been satisfactorily answered by the women's movement either.

I started to write about my earliest days, my first memories, but as time passed my subject grew. I wrote about my birthplace, Jerusalem, and about how as a child I had realized its loss. I wrote about my school in Cairo, where my childhood had been passed, and I described growing up in the shade of British imperialism. I wrote about the Suez war, and how I came of age, politically, in the Nasser era of triumphant nationalism. I wrote about my relationship with my church, with my culture, with my people, with my social class and others, with my university in the United States, with the books that I had read, with the men in my life, with the films I had seen, with the clothes I had worn. I wrote about the conflict between Christians and Muslims, the conflict between Palestinians and Lebanese, and that between Arab and European civilizations, tracing all the time the threads in my life. Though a Christian I identified as well with Islamic culture ; though Palestinian born, I was as well a citizen of Lebanon ; though born in Jerusalem I had come to love Beirut ; though an Arab I had had as well a western education. Always I tried to show that my sympathies

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lay with the best and highest ideals of these conflicting identities, not with the violent narrowness and exclusivity into which they had sunk in the war. I wrote about how I was torn by these confrontations, not only by my multiple identities and loyalties, but by the very lunacy and brutality of the military conflict which pitted families and civilizations against each other to the detriment and discredit of both sides. To me it was clear that especially the internal, internecine conflicts, those between Muslims and Christians, between Palestinians and Lebanese were unnecessary and illogical. These conflicts seemed to me to be cruelly tearing people apart, as they had torn me.

I am not sure I understood this at the time, but in writing about all this, I was trying to trace the connection between my life, and the world in which I lived. And as I wrote, I saw the connections, very clearly, very clearly indeed. I saw that I was all of the things that my world was, and that in me, in my personal life, were all the contradictions and conflicts which had burst out into open warfare on the streets of Beirut. In making the connection I had accomplished a very important stage in my life : I had set my mind at rest that I did indeed belong to the world.

As I wrote about myself and my connection with the world, I was at the same time drawing a map of the island that I had gradually become, as the oceans of war, and the numerous conflicts I had experienced, swirled around the shore, defining its limits.

I came eventually to understand that my alienation was the alienation of all citizens - non-citizens is probably a better word - in so many countries, particularly in the third world, where the nation-state was imposed without historical logic on societies most unsuited to this form of political organization. The state apparatus and all its derivatives, including inevitably those opposed to it, had been imposed from the top, and the people, especially ordinary individuals like myself, had had little or no voice in the origin or development of these states.

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I came to recognize a second reality, however : that my being a woman, a mother of young children, with confining and restricting domestic responsibilities, had imposed an even further degree of alienation on me, the already alienated non-citizen.

As the war in Lebanon developed, the question grew further and further in my mind : What is my place in the world ? Am I a passive spectator, a mere watcher of things, one who understands nothing, as that man on the balcony had implied ? Or am I an active participant in the events of my time ?

The answer began to form only as I wrote, and continued to write. And even today, I am not sure the answer is there, but it is still forming, and perhaps that is the answer : writing about the world has been my way to appropriate it. Writing about the world has made it mine. Writing about it has given me my place in it.

When I started to write, my writing was entirely secret. I only worked when I was alone, and I did not mention my writing to anyone. For years, nobody knew I was keeping a record of the war. For years I sat quietly and anonymously watching everyone : I watched the politicians making speeches, the fighters, the refugees, the students ; I watched my husband and our children and myself. I watched our friends, our colleagues, and our neighbours. I watched to see how people reacted, and I wrote down what I saw.

From the beginning, there was something subversive, or at least underground, at least rebellious, about my writing. I was trying to establish some sort of control over the world around me, and this was a world over which I felt I had no control. In writing, I was not only defining my place in the world, I was defining it. And in writing secretly about it, I **felt** subversive : I had a secret knowledge of the world that it did not have of me.

But I felt subversive for other reasons as well. For in all the writing that I did, I made no effort to record which political party did what to whom, or to check the military progress of this or that militia or army

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from this or that town or mountain. For one thing, I was not interested in doing what, after all, dozens of journalists had already done. I was recording human beings, not political parties. But I was also snubbing the political parties that I felt had snubbed me, that had never consulted me, and that had left me out entirely from the decision-making process. I felt nothing for them but the contempt and alienation natural to the dispossessed and the voiceless. In this I judge my book to have been very much a feminist, and therefore, for yet another reason, subversive one. Although I had definite political feelings, I did not for a moment feel that even those parties with whose views I was sympathetic in any way represented me, or spoke for me. They had not asked for my voice, any more than they had asked for my help.

In not writing about them, I was, in my way, denying their role as definers and establishers of reality, as movers of the world. I placed myself and other non-combatants in this role : I was proclaiming that this was our world, our reality, and that those fighting the war had disrupted it. I never thought of myself, the non-combatant, as idly watching, or as indifferent, or as disengaged from the world, but as left out of a decision-making process which was destroying everything I believed in. Later I learned to see that my being left out was my fault too, and that I had to share in the responsibility of my own alienation and exclusion.

In fact, I never made a conscious decision not to write political analysis. It came naturally, because between me and my world a fence had grown, a hedge, green and living, but nonetheless, blocking my view of the outside world. The domestic life I lived, was an absorbing, self-regenerating world, almost totally isolated from the surrounding world.

This puzzled me for a long time. I could not understand my own isolation.

At the time I started, I had already been for some time teaching at the BUC. My husband was a well-established and highly respected

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figure in academic and national life, as was his father before him. Although my father had died a few years earlier, my mother and my siblings were active and well-known in society. I had three young children, and they were in school. I should have felt very “plugged in,” as the saying goes, but I did not. I felt isolated, and fenced in. Domestic life absorbed me thoroughly, even though I lived a cosmopolitan, professional, and very active life.

I remember once during this period of my life filling out a form on which I was asked my profession. And I filled in “Housewife,” though I had been teaching for some years. Later, I thought about that for a long time, and could not understand it. Why had I written in “Housewife”, when I was teaching at the BUC, and when I had already written a very big chunk of my book ?

Where had the isolation come from ? Who had isolated me ? When had I been isolated ?

This question remained unanswered in my mind for years, and not until I had finished my first book, and embarked on my second did I begin to answer it. But the exploration of this question is for a later time.

Let me return to the war, and to writing about it.

As the war grew in intensity and complexity and longevity, writing about it became a way of life for me. Partly, I suppose, this had something to do with the therapeutic nature of writing, of recording. The more terrible the events we lived through, the more I felt the need to write them down, to find words and sentences and literary forms in which to contain and embody the terrors, and thus to subdue them. As some of my friends came to understand that I was writing, they began to tell me things that they wished recorded : “Write about this,” they would say, or “Tell them about that.” I became aware that I was speaking for many people, that I was a spokeswoman. But as time passed, I became more and more aware of myself as a rebel spokeswoman, as though a member of an underground movement. I became



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more and more aware of my own anger : I was angry at those who conducted the war, and at those who wrote about it, the journalists and the historians.

It seemed to me that both of these sets of people - that is, those conducting the war and those who wrote about it - most often referred to it as if it were a very tidy, well-organized affair. They made it sound rational, logical. Whether political leaders or writers, they seemed to me to be members of a very clearly patriarchal order, from which their authority, which in my heart I denied, stemmed.

The political leaders were obliged to offer rationalization to their soldiers as well as to their victims : they were fighting for order, for justice, for the future, for the past, for the good of the nation, for the peace of the world. What we were suffering was not suffering at all, merely a price to be paid for a future paradise and past sins. Very often rival political forces were making the same claim in their rhetoric even while bombing the city and killing civilians from all sides. Fairuz's voice singing nostalgic songs filled the gloomy night air of the shelters on all sides. The rival radio stations used the calming sweetness of her voice deliberately to establish fraudulent ideological links with a past of their own creation, and with the almost forgotten reality which she had embodied.

The journalists and historians and political commentators made sense of things in their own way. That, after all, was their *raison-d'être*, to explain the inexplicable, and to make order out of chaos. They made everything sound neat, tidy, sensible. This event had followed directly from that ; A had occurred in the south, clearly because B had occurred in the north. And so on.

But my experience of the war was utterly different, and it was my experience that I wished to document, not the logic behind the events. I experienced the war as a series of unlinked, chaotic, events, from which I had to protect my family. The war seemed every day to devolve into greater depths of insanity. The world presented itself to me

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as an utterly disorderly, disconnected, collection of political and ideological shards. Thus did I find myself in utter opposition to those who declared a clear logic to the events, not only because of the logic itself, but because I was rebelling against the very idea of finding logic in the insanity. And thus again and in yet another way was my writing subversive. It presented my version of the affair, and in it, the logic presented was exposed as illogic ; the reality of the war was far, far uglier than the claims made for it on all sides. So ugly, indeed, was it that no claims made for it could in any way justify it.

Early on, it already seemed clear to me that leaders were not saying the truth about the war : and that, almost without exception, the very ideals in the name of which the war on either side had been undertaken, were being betrayed. In my earliest efforts at writing about the war, including that first autobiography, I was obsessed with finding literary forms to express chaos, anarchy, barbarousness, disorder, and not to trace political trails.

Hence, I think, my question to our dinner guest on the balcony that evening early on in the war. It is not that I did not **know** what was happening : it was that I did not **recognize** what was happening because of the disparity between the official descriptions being offered, and even such clear political analysis as these professors were exchanging, and the reality that I was experiencing.

The only event of the war which seemed to me to have some logic, and to be entirely coherent, and consistent with the realities I knew of the world, was the Israeli invasion in 1982. Writing about that was the first time I recognized that I was writing a book, to be addressed to an audience, not just keeping a private journal.

No one who was in West Beirut during the summer of 1982 will ever forget it. The intensity of the experience was not only in the horror of the immense violence, but in the extraordinarily exhilarating sense of standing up to it, resisting its will. There was also an exhilarating sense of camaraderie among the besieged population, a phe-

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nomenon well-observed in many other instances. Whatever the contradictions and lies and mistakes that had preceded the invasion, its ferocity could only unite its victims.

After the ceasefire of August 13, I left to the United States to take my son to school. I was met at the airport by my brother and his family. His first words to me were : Jean, your hair has gone white. I had not noticed, and no doubt the passage of time had struck him, as much as the experience that we had had. But that evening, as I recounted what had happened, I felt self-consciously that I was an object of interest in having had the experience which, in their eyes, had turned my hair white, that I was a narrator of mysterious and important events, that I had an audience, that I had something to say, not just to myself, but to the world which had not shared that experience.

The following morning, my brother went to work, my sister-in-law went out of town on a pre-scheduled visit, their children went to school, and I was left in their home alone. I had a day to spend in New York before going to meet my son in Boston. At first, when I found myself alone in their apartment, I was overwhelmed with panic. I was in a terrible state. I paced the floors ; I smoked cigarette after cigarette ; I could not sit still. Looking back on it, I think I felt the emptiness that succeeded the terrible fullness of those days and nights of terror and excitement. I felt the full force of the emotions of the last weeks which I had not allowed myself to feel in Beirut : had I given in to them there I would have collapsed under their weight.

In the end, to calm myself down, and to bring myself under control - for I really felt that I was in serious danger of breaking out in hysterical screams, so intense was my panic - I took out a pad and a pen, and tried to write down exactly what had happened from the beginning of the invasion, and exactly what I had felt. Self-consciously and deliberately, I knew this time that what I had to say was not just for myself, but that I had to tell outsiders what it had been like.

That was the first time I realized that I was writing a book, a book

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that was to be published, sold in bookshops, and read by total strangers. At first the vision of these bookshops and strangers was dim and very far away, comfortably far in the distance. But as, step by step, the end got closer, a new kind of fear overwhelmed me. The early steps I undertook like an automaton, without feeling. Having the book read by publishers, getting a literary agent, that was easy. There was even some comfort for me when publishers rejected the manuscript. But the day my agent called from New York and told me a publisher had read the manuscript and wanted to publish it - that day I was overwhelmed with fear. Then I had several months of comfort again as the editing process began, and once again I was working alone, in privacy.

And then the book came out. The first time I held it in my hands I was overwhelmed not with pleasure or pride or satisfaction or happiness, but with terror. Already the advance reviews had been full of praise : but that scared me even more. At the time this terror was as incomprehensible to me as it was to my husband and my sons, but now I understand it better. It was that I felt utterly exposed. I who had safely been a “housewife” living behind my living hedge of family and home, was out in the middle of the street, having lost my cover. I understand now that when I wrote in “housewife” on that form, I was protecting myself, taking cover behind my husband, behind my children, using them to defend myself with, to hide myself from the responsibilities of public existence. It was as though I had used their bodies to shield myself from the bullets of public, civic danger.

For writing is a dangerous business. Telling the truth as one sees it, it seemed to me then, and it seems to me now, is the principal function of the writer, and this is a dangerous business. Writing exposes one, not only to criticism, but to the possibility of admitting that one has a position vis-à-vis public life, and therefore that one may be offending, and that one may be wrong. Writing is like gambling : you have to put your money down, and take your chance.

As a woman, I had been trained in the importance of not offending,

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in not raising my voice, in smiling sweetly, in being quiet. For me, therefore, speaking up, standing in the public arena and speaking up, goes against everything I had been taught, against a lifetime of training and conditioning.

When my book came out, and when the reviews started coming in, I felt very much my womanhood, as indeed I had done when I was writing. Gradually, as I became used to my new status, I felt aware that I had stepped across a very clearly marked boundary, and I could never be the same. I have certainly not been the same.

Writing my book took me out of the shadows and into the harsh light of the world. No longer can I hide behind my husband, or my sons, and expect them to speak up and take all the risks. There is no question that I felt safer and more secure as an anonymous person, than I do as a writer.

If we are to create a better world, however, it seems to me that we must all speak up. This is especially true of women, we who guard the inner sanctum of society, we must speak up, and **say** the world as we see it, however difficult this may be. We must do so each one in her own way, but our voices must be heard at last. For in the absence of our voices, we who form half the population, how can life possibly become better ?

The total absence of women in the decision-making process in this country is astounding. It is astounding because nowhere do there appear to be tougher, freer, more capable women, than here. It is our voices that are missing, our will to impose ourselves that is lacking. To become involved, to engage ourselves, we will have, each one in her own way, to break out of the lady-like silence which we have been taught. We have, in an unladylike way, to impose ourselves on the world, whether it likes us or not.

After all, it is our world, as much as it is anyone's, but we must lay claim to our birthright. This was to me the great lesson of writing about the world : writing about it made it mine.

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## ***J*E DIS BIEN HAUT : POURQUOI J'ECRIS**

***Jean Said MAKDISI***

*A la recherche de sa place dans l'existence et de ses rapports au monde, l'auteur découvre sa double aliénation et les causes de son isolement : sa condition de femme d'une part et, de l'autre, son appartenance au tiers-monde.*

*L'écriture a permis à Makdisi de reconquérir le monde. En forgeant ses mots, ses phrases, ses textes, elle a dominé sa peur. L'écriture est devenue une histoire qui, de la solitude, l'a menée à un engagement passionné contre la guerre et une résistance contre la violence. L'écriture est pour elle acte subversif, affirmation de soi et libération totale.*

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- \* Amongst her publications :
  - *Beirut Fragments : A War Memoir*, New York, Persea Books, 1990.
  - *Inside History : Three Generations of Arab Women* (forthcoming), New York, Persea Books, 1996.