



Najla Said's *Looking for Palestine*: Identity at Crossroads

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ABSTRACT

In her memoir, *Looking For Palestine: Growing up Confused In An Arab-American Family* (2013), Najla Said, the Palestinian-American actress, playwright, author, and activist, has raised more questions than giving answers, negotiating the space between a position of enunciation and the multiple yet diverse cultural legacies and political powers at play. This paper extends arguments on her memoir by focusing on how she portrays Palestine, excavating the memories of her childhood and adolescent years. The remote homeland portrait, Palestine, the abstract space established through her father's stories and media reports, is exposed to a new consciousness after her visit to Palestine in 1992 with her father, Edward Said, and family. The paper explores how Najla Said's journey to Palestine, along with the 9/11 attacks, was a pivotal turning point in her reconfiguration of self and identity while reconstructing the homeland. The paper also examines the inconsistent images of the homeland and the host land where Najla Said suffers from confusion and disintegration, trying to liberate herself from both prejudices, reidentified not only with the homeland but also with the host land. The paper analyzes Najla's narrative, with its chronotopic relationship that shapes her new consciousness of history and the landscape. It also examines how Najla Said traverses the space and friction between filiation and affiliation to live her life, to find her own voice and space in a more humane universal world that enjoys love, peace, and art.

Keywords: anorexia, Bakhtin, chronotope, diaspora, Edward Said, *Looking for Palestine*, memoir, Najla Said.



Introduction:

“I needed to be coaxed into writing my story because I still have a lot of insecurities about my abilities, my intelligence, and my authority to speak about the problems in the Middle East” (Najla Said, 2013, p.254). What authority does an Arab-American Palestinian have to speak for Palestine? In her memoir, *Looking For Palestine: Growing Up Confused In An Arab-American Family* (2013), Najla Said has raised more questions than giving answers, negotiating the space between a position of enunciation and the multiple yet diverse cultural legacies and political powers at play. This paper explores Najla Said’s memoir with the focus on reconfiguration of self, while reconstructing the homeland. Najla Said (b. 1974) in Boston, is a Palestinian-American actress, playwright, author, and activist who can be defined by being the daughter of Edward Said (1935-2003), the noted scholar, intellectual, the architect of colonial and post-colonial studies, and the radical Palestinian activist. Najla Said’s memoir recounts her visit to Palestine in 1992. Before the trip, her native land seemed to be an abstract space framed through her father’s stories and media reports. Through Najla’s narrative, a chronotopic relationship shapes her new consciousness of history, and the landscape. These temporal and spatial relationships are intrinsically connected to construct the particular world of the narrative; to make a concrete whole. The paper also explores the fluctuating and conflicting images of the homeland and the host land where Najla Said suffers from confusion and disintegration, trying to liberate herself from both prejudices. In addition, it examines how Najla Said traverses the space between filiation and affiliation to live her life, and to find her own voice and space.

Review of Literature:

A number of studies have studied Najla Said’s memoir as a diasporic narrative of return to Palestine, and the Palestinian identity, compared to other Palestinian writers or to her father, Edward Said. Tahia Abdel Nasser’s “Arab and Latin American Literature: Mourid Barghouti, Najla Said, and Lina Meruane in Palestine,” (2017a) for example, compared diasporic memoirs of return to Palestine of these three Palestine writers. Examining these Palestinian narratives across three languages, she shed light on how Arab, Arab-American, and Latin American writers of Arab ancestry contributed to the rise of new memoirs in Arabic, English, and Spanish within a global cultural production on Palestine. In comparison, Najla Said’s memoir is steeped in the Arab-American diaspora and her belated discovery of Palestine. Another important study is Abdel Nasser’s paper “Revolutionary Solitude: Edward Said and Najla Said” (2017b). She argued that Edward Said’s memoir, *Out of Place*, represents the dissonances and displacements that would become the dissent, freedom, and independence of the engaged or public intellectual, and that his memoir can be read through his advocacy for the rights of Palestinians, and his awareness of contrapuntal juxtapositions in language and culture. Abdel Nasser’s also studied the



memoir of Najla Said's *Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family* (2013). Abdel Nasser studied the memoir which belongs to a literary corpus made up of the memoir of her celebrated father and a new twenty-first-century generation of memoirs focusing on Arab-American and Arab subjectivity vis-à-vis Palestine. In the tradition of the Bildungsroman, Najla Said chronicles her turbulent youth and a complex trajectory towards self-knowledge, embodying a new form of subjectivity in a world that has changed. Her discovery is as much an acknowledgment of the hitherto-overlooked flows of Arab and American in her self-formation in the United States as it is an understanding of Palestine. Shatha Alhawamdeh's "Looking for the Arab (-American) Woman's Body in Najla Said's *Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family*" (2015), on the other hand, discussed how Najla Said tries to negotiate her troubled relationship with Arab identity, specifically Palestinian origins, through her body and her notions of female beauty. The author claimed that Said's conflicted body image is affected by contemporary Western standards for female beauty, reflecting at the same time her guilt and shame about her Arab background.

This paper further examines the memoir of Najla Said's *Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family* to investigate how she portrays Palestine, unearthing the memories of her childhood and adolescent years. The paper explores how Najla's journey to Palestine, along with the 9/11 attacks, was a pivotal turning point in her reconfiguration of self and identity while reconstructing the homeland. The paper also examines the fluctuating and conflicting images of the homeland and the host land where Najla Said suffers from confusion and disintegration, trying to liberate herself from both prejudices. The paper takes a different approach by analyzing Najla's narrative, with its chronotopic relationship that molds her new consciousness of history and the landscape. The paper also investigates how Najla Said traverses the space between filiation and affiliation to live her life, to find her own voice and space in a more humane universal world.

Methodology:

Najla Said's artistic engagement with exploring Palestine, which used to be an abstract metaphorical place constructed by her intellectual parents, family, school, and media, offers material for exploration from different perspectives. That depiction of the remote homeland, Palestine, is exposed to a new consciousness when she visits her homeland with her family in 1992. That visit, followed by the 9/11 attacks, was the turning point in Najla Said's new identification not only with the homeland but also with the host land. The text will be analyzed using Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotope, and Edward Said's concepts of place, and relationships of filiation and affiliations.

Bakhtin defines the *chronotope*, literally 'time-space' in relation "to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically



expressed in literature.” He explains that spatial and temporal indicators in the literary artistic chronotope “are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (2020, p.84). To Bakhtin, this “intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope” (p.84). Bakhtin’s chronotopes are represented in different forms such as the folklore chronotope, or of adventure, travel, the road, the life course of one seeking knowledge, of encounter, of threshold, of the street, etc. These chronotopes have different markers and indicators infused with the different motifs. The spatial indicators of the roads, side-roads, streets, borders, fences, bridges, towers, doorways, airports and checkpoints, schools, road signs, and others in *Looking for Palestine* have their significance in shaping the new awareness and self-consciousness of the author.

Another significant concept of place is that of Edward Said who examines the notion of place and how could someone “feel himself out of place, exiled, alienated” during a period of displacement. This idea of place according to him, “does not cover the nuances, principally of reassurance, fitness, belonging, association, and community, entailed in the phrase at home or in place” (2019, p. 228). Thus, he uses the word ‘culture’

to suggest an environment, process, and hegemony in which individuals (in their private circumstances) and their works are embedded, as well as overseen at the top by a superstructure and at the base by a whole series of methodological attitudes. It is in culture that we can seek out the range of meanings and ideas conveyed by the phrases belonging to or in a place, being *at home in a place*. (pp.228-229)

Edward Said explains that “culture is used to designate not merely something to which one belongs but something that one possesses and, along with that proprietary process, culture also designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture come into forceful play” (p.229). He differentiates between filiation of biological and natal bonding and affiliation of the transcendental, of a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs, or a world vision. He claims that affiliation or the new system changes the filial relationship, held together by natural bonds and natural authority with its natural forms of obedience, respect, fear, love, and instinctual conflict, “into what seem to be transpersonal forms—such as guild consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional respect, class, and the hegemony of a dominant culture. The filiative scheme belongs to the realms of nature and of “life,” whereas affiliation belongs exclusively to culture and society (pp.236-237).

Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family will be examined in the light of these relationships and how both dominate the author’s consciousness in her search for her own place and voice.



Analysis and Discussion:

In *Looking for Palestine*, Najla Said introduced herself as a Palestinian Lebanese-American Christian woman starting out as a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP), growing up as a Jew in New York City. Since her childhood, she was aware of her difference: “dark-haired among blond girls, living, unlike her classmates, in the Upper West side of Manhattan,” with “books piled high on shells and tables, pipes, pens, Oriental rugs, painted walls and strange houseguests.” Her family was surrounded by some of the Western world’s greatest scholars and writers as well as the elite Palestinian resistance (2013, p. 2). Moreover, growing up the daughter of a Lebanese mother and a renowned Palestinian thinker in New York City in the 1980s and 90s was “confusing and unsettling,” struggling “desperately to find a way to reconcile the beautiful, converting, loving world of [her] home, culture, and family with the supposed “barbaric” and “backward” place in society others perceived it to be” (pp.2-3). After years of trying desperately to convince people about her culture, or the place her family came from, she stopped trying. Though this idea of having one identity left her “confused”, yet, the same idea left her “inspired, engaged, interested, complicated, and aware” (pp.3-4).

Part of Najla Said’s confusion and what she felt was an exception was related to her father, Edward Said, who was viewed as the “father of postcolonial studies [...] the author of *Orientalism*, [...] the symbol of Palestinian self-determination, champion of human rights, equality, and social justice.” Najla describes him as a “humanist” who “spoke truth to power.” Still, to others, he was “a terrorist.” To her, he was her “daddy” (pp.4-5). Nasia Anam comments on Najla’s decision to refer to her famous and respected father as “Daddy” and her mother, Mariam Said, as “Mommy” throughout the text, dubbing “one of the world’s foremost and influential literary scholars “Daddy”, relating it to “Najla Said’s persistent innocence as an act of resistance.” Anam adds that “understanding Edward Said as “Daddy” is to understand him not as a public — and publicly *owned* — figure, but instead as the affectionate father of a troubled daughter who means to claim him” (2014).

Though Najla’s parents were “secular humanists” who never associated themselves with any group or religious sect, they further confused her by constantly asserting their ‘Arab-ness’ and her father was always proud in “telling everyone he was both Palestinian *and* Arab.” As a child, Najla could not understand this complicated issue. Her father was a Christian, a British/American-educated professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, concerned with the Middle East though he had left it at the age of 14, returning as a visitor. His “childhood memories of Palestine, Egypt, and Lebanon, where he had spent most of his time were of idyllic places where Arab Muslims, Arab Christians, and yes, Arab Jews, lived in a “melting pot” much like the New York City in which I was raised” (pp.23,25-26). Though Najla was exposed to Arabic at home, with her parents who



had a deep bond with their culture, she could not identify with her culture and “take pride in it, [she] couldn’t find a place in it” (p.64).

Najla’s heightened and growing awareness of her physical awkwardness, with her family’s overwhelming lefty politics, coincided with the growing violence and political instability in the Middle East throughout the 80s. The civil war devastated Lebanon with the involvement of the Syrians, Israelis, Palestinians, and Americans. At the same time, Najla knew that she “was Palestinian” (pp.20-21). She adds that Beirut and Lebanon which she knew as her home “became synonymous with all that was uncivilized, evil, barbaric, violent and foreign in the world” (p.82). Najla adds that “the “Palestinian” thing never made sense. It was this funny word that [her] dad would use to describe himself, and [she] didn’t even know it referred to a place. It would have been a dietary, a blood type or a disease.” She was too young to understand the complications of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, and the historical context of things (pp.51-52). Najla comments that she felt “confused, and torn between complex worlds [she] didn’t understand, and as a result [she] became more shy, more quiet, and more comfortable escaping into the fantasy world of [her] books and the complex imaginary realms [she] would create in the privacy of [her] room” (p.83).

Beirut stood as a chronotope with its different markers as the airport terminals, harbor, sea boat, smoke-filled mountains, soldiers with rifles, and bombs. In 1983, aged nine, her family managed to visit Beirut the summer after Israel’s invasion of Lebanon. Her father could not join them because it was not “safe for him as a Palestinian” (p.91). She describes the situation of Beirut during the war as an “utterly horrifying” with all its violent acts and traumas (pp.93-94). They managed to leave Beirut so quickly but the memories of that trip were traumatic. She could not understand “the juxtaposition of life-threatening explosions and a luxurious TV-show cruise”, with the dark, small, overbooked ferry, “thick and salty and heavy” air, with “pilgrims dressed in white robes” praying, “like fluttering angels.” She confesses that the whole week has been so “surreal” (p.97).

Studying in a Jewish district, and growing up among Jewish friends further confused her. After returning from Beirut, she began to realize that even she did not entirely identify with Arabs as they were presented to her in America; she actually was one of them just as much as she was an American from New York. Najla felt her “difference at school started to feel deeper, sadder, darker, and more incomprehensible” to her little mind (p.99). Her mother realized how difficult it had become for Najla to be an American with Arab parents (p.104). When she was eleven she started to go to a psychiatrist and “was dismissed as disruptive, and because of [her] already deeply acute sense of self, [she] internalized the “diagnosis” [she] did get as being yet another symptom of [her] weird, ugly, dirty “otherness” (p.114). For the seven consecutive summers after 1984, Najla did not go to Lebanon. Instead, she went to sleepaway camps, “to be as American as possible to fit in and stay happy, and



the camp was the perfect environment in which to do so especially since I was on my own to create an identity for myself” (p.105). The sleepaway camp served as the new chronotope where she can create her new identity.

Najla’s parents transferred her to Trinity school in 1988 where she had to make new friends and find an identity all over again. There, though Najla was not comfortable with her own ‘Arab-ness’, she had found her place, having new Jewish friends; becoming “more and more absorbed in the world of Jewish culture.” She started to know Yiddish words by the time she finished high school” (pp.128-129,132). Growing up as a teenager in high school, with more discussions with her Jewish friends, Najla started to question her parents about Zionism and the Palestinian intifada which began in 1987.

The Palestinian intifada was a chronotopic scene of encounter in the streets, with young Arab boys throwing rocks at enormous Israeli army tanks, in a country which is still ‘alien’ to her, though her ‘real homeland’ serves as an internal organizing centre for the point of view, and for evaluating the entire picture of that foreign land. She can identify with people there. That scene demonstrates how Najla navigates that tension between the filiative and affiliative relationships, to question her own consciousness of the homeland and the people there. In the chronotope of encounter, people, as Bakhtin says, “who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another.” He explains that, on the road, “the spatial and temporal series defining human fates and lives combine with one another in distinctive ways, even as they become more complex and more concrete by the collapse of *social distances*. The chronotope of the road is both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement” (pp.243-244). For Najla, the Palestinian intifada was “a moment in history” with the young Arab boys throwing rocks at the huge Israeli army tanks; a scene which became “sympathetic and calling card,” tugging at the “collective heartstrings in much the same way the Chinese man in Tiananmen Square and the young Germans who rejoiced as the Berlin Wall crumbled would” (p.134).

Though the world still seemed ‘fragmentary’ to her, politics still boring, and “the Middle East was still a major pain in [her] butt,” her father was on television more and more, and she was proud of the fact that they held him in such high esteem, “fascinated by the idea of being committed and standing up for human rights.” Though the incredibly long civil war in Lebanon had finally ended, and people stopped talking about Beirut as if it was the “scariest place on earth”, she started to feel less comfortable again with another turmoil in the Middle East, the Gulf War which began in 1990. Still, Najla was more inclined to ignore and marginalize feelings related to this part of her world, as well as conversations that centred on the war and politics (pp.135-136, 139).



Najla's trip to France when she was seventeen with a group of students, was another moment when she thought she could feel in Europe "less strange" in a place she fits in, but Najla realized she "was utterly wrong" (p.147-148). At the airport, on her way home, Najla was signaled out by one of the airlines' representatives, holding her passport, asking her about her birthplace as well as the birthplaces of her parents. That experience was traumatic because of the racist treatment. She agonized with feeling "the dirty, disgusting Arab," and "experiencing the punch-in-the-stomach feeling of racism" (p.152).

Another turning point in her life was when they were told of her father's diagnosis with chronic leukemia. With her growing debilitating insecurities about her appearance and body size, the fear she felt "was devastating," feeling "like a five-year-old,... slipping. [She] was confronting racism, death, sex, and being on [her] own in the world for the first time; it was too much, too fast. [She] felt so desperately out of control of everything." She stopped eating, kicking her "anorexia into high gear. None of this was conscious...[She] wanted to take on her father's illness, and share it with him. [She] was depressed, and wanted to disappear. Anorexia after all, it's just a slow form of suicide" (p.153-154).

Suddenly, after her graduation from high school in 1992, her father, aware of his mortality, had resolved himself to return, with his family, "to the land in which he was born," for the first time back since he left permanently in 1947. Unlike the trips of her Jewish friends, hers would be "completely different. Because [she] was going to Palestine" (p.156). Najla with her father and family would go to the geographical heart of all their deep historical and political traumas, to the holy land, the centre of her father's most controversial political battles. That landscape, as Shammass describes, is "the shifting personal, national, intellectual, emotional – and above all – political landscapes of the lost homeland," Palestine, that [Edward Said] "never believed was "a lost cause" (2003). Najla adds that her father had not been back to the place of his birth in more than forty years, thus, the trip for him was an emotional one. She describes that saying,

It was as if he ached to return at that particular time, with us, to come to terms with his own history and mortality, just as much as I ached not to. I understood that word- "ache"- quite deeply; my body ached constantly from the fatigue... My entire self ached from feeling empty, scared, lost, and rejected. [...] the trip made it all so much worse (p.157).

Part of her dilemma was being a girl in an Arab family compared to her brother, Wadie. She felt that he "betrayed" her, joined her parents comfortably straddling the line between "East" and "West," leaving her "standing alone and lost, in America." She adds that she knew that for her dad the return to Palestine was a matter of bonding of her father and brother more than it was about her and her edification. She admits that though her father adored her, she felt that little girls like



her “didn't need to know about serious things...And it was one of the reasons I hadn't felt more motivated to learn about my culture” (pp.158-159).

She was eighteen when they visited Palestine in 1992. Visiting her homeland, Palestine, was a turning point as a chronotope of encounter which would shape her consciousness about what had been constructed in her imagination about the homeland. Najla felt she was stuck with what she had tried to ignore and avoid; adding that when they landed in Tel Aviv, she felt her insides turn, saying:

I was certain we would end up in jail for trespassing on Israel... The heat was suffocating [...] I was in no state of mind and body to feel anything close. There it was, speeding by my window: the Promised Land. It looked to me like nothing but a horrifically frightening place. There was greenery, but I noticed only shrubs. There was water, but I noticed only desert. And everywhere that there was a small Arab town it seemed to be surrounded by concrete slabs of unmovable earth. These, I learned, were the “settlements.” (pp.159-60)

Najla started recalling what she knew as her alternative homeland: Lebanon. While exploring the country the very next morning, she felt more attached to Lebanon which still flourished in her heart. In spite of its proximity to Lebanon, what Najla saw in Palestine was “only division, separation.” She adds that “going to Palestine knowing you are one of “them” but looking, sounding, and acting like one of “us” was just confusing” (p.161) The Arabs spoke to her in different languages but never Arabic, and she was unsure of how to explain herself. The situation was “quite surreal” with journalists everywhere and her father being intercepted for interviews (p.161).

They ventured to her father's childhood home in West Jerusalem. Lots of ministers “inhibit the huge houses in well-kept Talbiya, the neighborhood of [her] daddy's youth.” They walked around in circles until they found the house. Najla's father “was filled with panic and nervous energy; he was unsure of how he might react on seeing his house again after so many years, but he knew it would not be lightly.” On the door of the house, they “were confronted with a plate that read, in great big letters: “The International Christian Embassy.” After researching the organization, her father found out that this benevolent-sounding society was, in fact, “a right-wing fundamentalist Christian and militantly pro-Zionist group, run by a South African Boer, no less!” As we are Palestinian Christians, the irony was not lost on us” (pp.162-63).

That encounter with the house reminds us of the chronotope of the road and the threshold which can be combined with the motif of encounter. Her father “circled the house feverishly” with the camera, shooting pictures of the façade, remembering



the park across the street which is now beautifully trimmed and filled with nannies playing with their small Israeli charges.

He recalled the porch, the gate. Daddy even pointed up to the window of the room in which he was born. After every realization, exclamation, and configuration of a memory in his head, he ran his hand through his hair like a child who was trying to remember where, on the long road he had traveled, he had lost his way. And he resolutely refused to go inside, as if entering would confirm the reality of what had happened. (pp.164-65)

The house, the plaque on the door, the window, are all chronotopic markers of the threshold, as well as the road, the side roads, the streets, the park, and the square, that extend those spaces into the open air, to be the main places of action. Bakhtin explains that the chronotope of the threshold is “highly charged with nonemotion and value [...] it can be combined with the motif of encounter, but its most fundamental instance is as the chronotope of crisis and break in a life.” He adds that the word “threshold” itself has a metaphorical meaning in everyday usage, together with its literal meaning, and “is connected with the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life, the fear to step over the threshold)” (p.249). At the threshold of Said’s house, this chronotope intervenes with a time-space of precolonial Palestine, resulting in the emotionally-tensed moments of experiencing interactions of a precolonial past and a colonial present, reshaping and reconfiguring their consciousness of their homeland.

They walked the narrow streets of the old city of Jerusalem, visiting the Arab towns of Hebron, Bethlehem, Nablus, Nazareth, with Israeli soldiers everywhere they went, on the sides of the streets and outside tourist sites. Najla constantly looked around to find faces who understood her and recognized her as someone who belonged there. She found comfort nowhere but in the faces of the Palestinian children they met along the way and seemed sweet “so sweet, so innocent, so playful, so normal” (p.165). She adds,

They, like me, were silent. They very clearly had no control over their surroundings. They were simply born into this history, and just like me, they had no memories of a Palestine other than the one in which they lived. But unlike me, they knew no other outside world, and in their ignorance of another reality. (p.165)

This scene evoked awkward feelings and connections along the victim/victimizer paradigm. The sight of Israeli children conjured up chronotopes related to the memories of Palestinian children: “Each group of children has the memories of our parents’ separate tragedies to defend and protect, and none of us really get it” (p.167).



The encounter with the landscape took another shape when they piled into a UN vehicle and went to visit Gaza on Tuesday, June 16, 1992. The entrance to Gaza, as Najla's father commented to them and later in his article, "gave the place the appearance of an enormous concentration camp." The situation in Gaza was devastating. Her father was telling them about this place which has the highest population density in the world, with nightmarish statistics of "infant-mortality rates, high unemployment, the lowest per capita income in the Occupied Territories, the most days of curfew, the fewest medical services, and on and on." She was listening but didn't need to hear the details. She could see everything, and could still smell the open sewers though the car windows were closed" (pp.169-70).

They arrived in Gaza where she truly realized that she had absolutely no idea, about anything. She "felt very conspicuous and alienated from" whom she identifies as "my people" as she descended from the car. Then she put her fancy suede shoe down into the muddy earth of Gaza and inhaled that horrifying stench of raw sewage; it had penetrated the car window." The details of people's customs were confusing to her; men and women sat in separate rooms. Najla followed her mom into the female salon. As they entered, the women began talking about cooking; she understood them though her Arabic was too weak to respond. She was too bored, so she slipped away into the room with the men who were talking very seriously, about politics (pp.170-71).

The situation in that smoke-filled room in Gaza was ironic. The irony of [her] dad's renown is that, until he passed away, his face and his name were far more familiar to people outside Palestine than they were to anyone who actually lived there." They knew he was important, "a connection to the outside world or, more specifically, the West," and they came here to tell him their stories. Najla tried to wrap her "teenage head around the existence of such a place in the world, where people are trapped like caged animals in the filthiest zoo on earth, while [she] somehow got to prance around in suede shoes and \$150 skirts and then get on a plane and go home" (pp. 172-173).

The trip to Palestine added another dimension to her anorexia. Najla admits that "I wanted desperately to suffer, not just for my daddy but for all of Palestine as well. I felt guilty, horrible, and sick to my stomach. I never wanted to eat again. How could I, when others who were just like me in every other way were unlucky enough to be born into nothing?" (pp. 173-174). Her need to feel real pain and suffering intensified the drive back to Jerusalem. At that moment, she wanted to speak to everyone about her teenage anguish, her father's suffering f cancer, and her intense need to feel the pain of these Palestinians. As they were driving back through the desert, as she describes,

it seems so poetic to me: there I was, in the land of "our Lord and Savior" and I actually wanted to become some sort of ascetic, crucified, suffering martyr. I



wanted to stop being so conspicuous, I wanted to go away, I wanted to scream loudly, "Why is all this happening?" but I had no voice. My body had become my voice. Starvation, more than ever, would become of my language. (p.174)

This chronotopic moment of Najla's realization of her filiation to her own real homeland serves as an organizing centre for the point of view, the scales of comparison, and evaluations determining how alien cultures and countries are seen and understood, to shape a new awareness and self-consciousness. Najla felt tormented with a million thoughts racing through her head, trying to find answers to the questions of why she was born lucky, why didn't she have to live here, or passing as a Jew if she wanted, and why did she get to go to the best schools in the world (p.175). They finally left Palestine for Jordan; a short tense journey across the Allenby Bridge. This journey is similar to that of many who make it "either in or out of Israel, and if they do, it will not be without a long wait, a long of questioning, searching, and humiliation." She adds that once "we were across the bridge and into Jordan, the fences around all of our hearts melted. There was a huge collective sigh of relief" (pp.177-178).

Looking back at Palestine, though just a few miles away, it "was gone. And with it went the barbed wire, the fear, and the sadness" (p.179). Finally, they left Jordan for their final destination: Lebanon. The war had ended just two years earlier, in 1990, and she was so thrilled and relieved at the same time, "feeling at home somewhere in the Middle East," seeing no smoke and hearing no bombs. For the rest of their stay in Beirut, Najla was sad and disappointed to see the aftermath of the war and its atrocities, recalling her recent trip to the living nightmare, Gaza. In Beirut, she saw the devastation of what were once majestic buildings. Despite the destruction, "there was also ebullient evidence of life: restaurants, bars, and stores, of course, and in true Lebanese style, everyone was at the beach enjoying the summer weather." The journey back to New York could not have ended "without a special, truly Middle Eastern experience: a thorough search at the Beirut airport, during which I was frisked aggressively by a female officer" (pp.180-82).

Back to America after that traumatic trip that overwhelmed her emotionally, psychologically, and physically, Najla felt more confused, disoriented, and dislocated between the two chronotopes of the imaginary home that is no longer the same and the host culture which has been reconfigured by the return visit. That major life change has been translated into a severe physical disorder. Najla's weight continued to drop, along with her mood. That August just before she left for college she walked to her father and collapsed in tears, saying: "Daddy. There is something very wrong with my brain." The next week they sent her to the psychiatrist who diagnosed Najla with anorexia nervosa. She admits that "the first time in a long time, [she] felt acknowledged" (pp.186-87). In an interview with Salon magazine, Najla explained how she developed anorexia. She became anorexic as a child when she was not allowed to go to the Middle East because of the war. Najla was American, but she felt



“exiled from the Middle East completely,” disconnected and not being held or feeling like she “had a place.” She found the connection between her eating disorders and her feelings of being disconnected from her own culture; and an important part of her journey that she wanted to write about. She adds, “I wanted to write about it for that reason...I thought it was important to note, because it’s a physical manifestation of me not fitting in the Middle East when we go there...it was very much associated with my being totally an alien (Salon Magazine, 2013).

Najla went to the University of Princeton to start her new life in 1996. She began to realize how frequently the works of her own father were assigned, and in different fields of study. She became aware of his monumental achievements in the world of scholarship (pp.192-193). Najla majored in Comparative Literature and received a certificate in theatre and dance. Princeton was the perfect place for her where she “unintentionally honed a new identity for [her] college self. No longer a WASP turned Jewish girl, [she] was now, truly, a "European Intellectual" (p.194). Though Najla was in disastrous physical health during her college years, she managed to enjoy normal undergraduate life immensely. She elaborates,

I knew that guys were briefly fascinated by me because I looked different and dressed differently from most of the other girls [...] and I was the daughter of some larger-than-life intellectual. I was "exotic" and "enigmatic" and, therefore, by extension, "a creative genius with a deep sorrow inside" or something like that. [...] I knew what Orientalism is about [...] I found my own literary interest and favorite authors, [...] It was relatively easy to avoid my ‘Arab-ness’ in college too. (pp.196-97)

Najla wrote her senior thesis about the metatheatricality of theatre, performing in countless places and showcases, encouraged by her parents. The process of pursuing professional acting was complicated as she ventured into the commercial world with the name Najla Said. She adds, “I struggled to figure out which I was. I refused to change my name. I had no deep attachment to my culture, but I felt very strongly that I should not have to do something so arcane to be seen for all that I was. I felt that deep painful racist punch in my stomach.” She kept going but got rejected. After a few years of hostessing in restaurants and teaching acting to kids, she got a job tutoring eighth-graders for the private high school entrance exam and high school students for the SATs (pp. 201-202).

Meanwhile, Najla started returning to Lebanon more often, as she says, “to reconnect with” her culture and her place in it. Lebanon, her alternative homeland, flourished, reemerging from the destruction of the fifteen-year civil war. She imparts, “I found myself flourishing too. It took some years, of course, but I slowly began to be able to nourish myself, not only with the food my relatives fed me but with the love that they gave me, and the opportunity to be part of a culture that embraced me fully” (p.204). With a new perception of the Middle East, she kept going to Lebanon



to explore and rediscover the things she couldn't when she was younger. It is the captivating culture, the little details of the landscape, of food, language, and of people's lives, she was trying to articulate to the world. She loved the details of the muezzin, the call to prayer, the spiritual mysterious feel of the air and water, the smells, sounds, spices, flavors, carpets, etc. She was fascinated by that culture.

but what really grabs you about this very electric, vibrant culture is that everyone who is talking to *you* is talking to *you* and looking at *you* and thinking about *you* and trying to make *you* (another person) feel good and comfortable and good and content. The Arabic language is a perfect example of how this works. (pp.205-6)

That novel comfort that she felt recently with the Middle East was usurped in the summer of 2000 when they went to Beirut, visiting the Lebanon-Israeli border where the Israelis had just relinquished their occupation. There, Najla admits, "I shuddered... I was suddenly scared, and I felt the same constricted "I don't belong here" feeling I had felt when I had gone to Palestine, eight years earlier" (p.209). Najla and her brother "posed for pictures at the "crossroads of our identity... Just across the wire was Israel. Palestine – I hadn't been there since 1992. There it was. So close but, oh yes, so far away." Visiting the abandoned Israeli checkpoint tower, her father was photographed as "*Edward Said throwing a rock in solidarity with the people of Southern Lebanon.*" By the time they got back to Beirut, two hours later, "the photo was all over the Internet, and there was outrage at home, and the New York Post had featured the picture with the story about [her] dad's terrorist activities and people were coming out of the woodwork to demand he be fired from Columbia" (p.209-211). The incident at the border checkpoint tower or the marker of the chronotope was not only a turning point to her, but also to her father. Najla admits that this event was "the beginning of the end of my father's spirit." Between the backlash at Columbia, the Second Palestinian Intifada beginning in that fall, and the crowning event of 9/11, her father stopped speaking to the American media. However, he wrote for the Arab press more, and did "interviews only for the BBC or other European media outlets that would give him more than a two-minute sound bite to explain "why they hate us" (pp.211-212).

The 9/11 attacks were yet another chronotope, shaping Najla's identity. Her life since then has changed beyond expectations. She admits that "for those of us born and bred on the streets of New York City, this event was an unbelievable attack on *home*. Not home in the sense of America, but in the sense of *my house, my world, my life*" realizing that she could not drive anywhere because "Home was here, "under attack." (p.214). Najla was infuriated by the gym trainer's accusations that "this is clearly the work of Palestinians—it's an act that has Arafat written all over it!!!" She was shocked and found herself defending Arafat and the Palestinians (p. 215).



That moment was a traumatic one; a case for a new consideration of the concept of 'home', as well as 'Palestinians'. Immediately, Najla ran out of the gym, and called her father trying to understand what was happening and asking him: "Did we do this? Why would we do this?" Najla had a panic attack when she said "we" as if she wanted confirmation that she was not wrong about her conception of "Palestinians" (pp.215-16). Najla was trying to defend herself and her people because she has seen both sides of the story as her father had, but "it's so hard to stand by it when everyone around you is just not hearing you." She was horrified, and it was difficult to sleep, thinking of the "Islamic terrorists", as well as "the Americans" who would most certainly be coming to root us out." Najla recalled the traumatic war memories of Lebanon when she was a child, "afraid of where to go if Palestine, Lebanon, and New York aren't safe, then where on this earth do I go?" (pp.216-17).

With this traumatic incident, Najla came to the new realization of America, the host land, which used to be an alternative home for her, and of her new identity as a hyphenated American. She admits that she was "crowned and outed as an "Arab-American", a label she had never been before. That feeling was "horrifying" and she could not explain. She states: "I don't feel entirely American, never have, but it's not because I don't want to or because I don't seem it—I do want to, I do seem it. I don't feel entirely Arab though either, for the same reasons. But I also certainly don't feel like any *combination of the two*" (p.217). She elaborates on this identity issue with reference to her father who did not like labels especially "Oriental" which was "the one he was most famous for disliking." Once he explained this by saying that there are two alternatives: "either you go in and just obliterate your past, which some people have tried to do, or you cultivate your identity with a group of yourself, like the Koreans do that...America's an assimilationist model, where people become American, and America overrides everything else" (pp.217-18).

After 9/11, thinking of her father's alternatives, Najla joined an Arab-American theater company; a group of Arab theatre artists who started to work on a theatre project about Arabs in America. She helped them to perform at the American – Arab Anti-discrimination Committee (ADC) conference because her parents were founding members of the ADC. Najla's parents were so happy that she "had finally interacted with some Arabs" (pp.220, 223). She got to know both her parents in a new way that year, and she understood how they retained so much pride in their 'Arab-ness' (pp.226-27). Their show finally went up, in August of 2002; they were excited, proud, and overwhelmed. They felt they found their own voices and their way to their own culture. Her parents were very proud of her achievement. Moreover, she was captivated by the stories of her parents' lives. She elaborates,

I was exceedingly proud of them, for coming here to the States alone as really young people, for confronting racism head-on, for not giving in and hiding their Arab identity, in the way I had always wanted to do. For never, ever giving in to petty sectarian and nationalistic nonsense, and for always being



humanists, no matter how many times they were still called terrorists [...] I had fallen in love with my family and everything they stood for. (p.228)

Najla finally found a position of enunciation and a medium of expression through associating with a group of Arabs in theatrical performances.

Her father died on September 25, 2003, in Long Island Jewish hospital, and his ashes were carried to Lebanon and buried in Brummana as he wanted. Though some people asked why he was not laid to rest in Palestine? These people, according to her, saw him as a human symbol of a geographical place. She, however, defended that decision saying:

It actually never occurred to us to bury Daddy in Palestine, because Palestine, though a cause he embraced wholeheartedly and fought for his entire adult life, is a place he hadn't really known. The world had conflated "Edward Said" with Palestine, but I had not. I had only really ever known Daddy, but how would I explain that to the world? (p.241-42)

Palestine for both father and daughter stood for a cause mutually embraced. If Edward Said was conflated politically with Palestine, Najla Said liberated herself from that national political bias.

The loss of her father was traumatic; thus, Najla found relief in going back alone to Lebanon to grieve, "to a place that held [her] so tightly as a child." She felt lucky "to come from a beautiful seaside paradise, [she] felt overwhelmingly grateful that it had been returned to [her], after a childhood of embarrassment, pain, and confusion over "where [she was] from." Najla's frequent visits to Lebanon helped her enjoy herself completely; she felt wonderful, and "was filled with a sense of wholeness" (pp.243-44). Lebanon as she describes, "was really, truly, finally [her] safe heaven, [her] home, again." Najla was tormented when she was disconnected as a child and a teenager from Lebanon. Najla adds that she "had been in pain and isolation and what felt like torment in America, longing to feel "normal"(pp.245).

Najla's visit to Lebanon in May 2006 functions as a chronotope of threshold, opening new realms of realizations in relation to self and place. For Najla, Palestine can still be experienced and defined through the politically unstable contexts of its adjacent lands. She loved Lebanon, her home where she "belonged somewhere." She learned the next day of Hizbullah's capturing some Israeli soldiers and the Israelis had begun their invasion of Lebanon. At that moment, Najla realized she was "trapped, and [she] was alone...froze, thinking of the families [she] had swum near the day before— they must all be either that, or homeless" (pp. 246-247). That moment was climactic to her; this was not in Palestine, or part of the civil war in Lebanon; it was the Israeli invasion of her 'home'. Najla felt the need to explain the situation and clarify her point of view as a humanist who can be a thoughtful person, open-minded,



tolerant, and a pacifist who does not think about hatred. The case, however, is completely different when

you are being attacked, when bombs are falling around you, planes are hovering over your head, when your life is in danger and you are scared, it is so easy to look up to the sky and feel abject, boiling hatred for the people doing this to you, and curse them out. When you are fearful for your life, and you are being bombed by a certain group of people, you are not thinking... The summer of 2006 was the first time I had ever experienced real, pure, true hate. (pp.248-49)

However, Najla "calmed down" and "rationalized" as she was able to get out. She kept contemplating over the whole situation in the region which was a turbulent one; where people were trapped in a conflict region, in fear, and under constant threat of attack. Najla recognized that, whether "you are an Israeli or an Arab, you are going to continue to hate unless you have an alternative. And many people don't" (pp.248-9).

Najla realizes bitterly that though she has never returned to Palestine, "Palestine always returns to [her]." In May of 2007, she went back to Lebanon and heard of what was happening in a Palestinian refugee camp and the refugees' difficult situation. She elaborates that when these refugees arrived, they were welcomed with sympathy, but they are resented now. Many of them were born in Lebanon; they have never known Palestine, and they cannot be Lebanese citizens because "they are Palestinian" (p.250). Najla felt she was in a dilemma, hearing some Lebanese people say awful things about Palestinians. Najla is in Lebanon, but she is not really a Palestinian either. She is not "one of those people" in the camps, wondering if it is because she has a U.S. passport and a famous father, or because she is a Christian? Najla states that she hates "that the Palestinians in the camps are becoming refugees again... And yet in America, there is no doubt that since 9/11, [she is] officially an Arab, bridging the gap between two worlds that don't understand each other" (p.251).

Another chronotopic scene of the street took place one Sunday, on a Broadway street, in an affiliative situation, when she saw some girls protesting wearing "Free Palestine" T-shirts. Najla was thinking that she should stop and buy a T-shirt, realizing she is this Palestinian-walking by them, having these intense chills when she hears the word "Palestine" spoken aloud. She adds

I feel immensely grateful that these people are protesting for me, my people, my cause [...] I'm thinking that Palestinians are human beings and isn't it ironic that here comes one now, walking down the street? But what am I supposed to do when people are protesting for me, and how am I supposed to react when people who are about as far removed from the plight of Palestinians as anyone could ever possibly be our walking down the street, talking about my people's suffering, a suffering I still don't even fully



understand? And I'm thinking that words are so powerful, but "Palestine," that word, make me want to cry. (pp.252-53)

There, at that moment, Najla identifies herself with her people, her cause, with her homeland, Palestine.

With that new identification, Najla Said has been "invited to speak, talk, write, and create theater as an "Arab-American" over the last decade. She has felt her "love and happiness and connection to the Middle East grow," falling in love with Lebanon, and feeling as happy and comfortable there as she is in New York. Najla admits, "I have learned to speak up about the truth of what I have seen. But none of that has made me less of an Upper West Side princess. None of it changes the fact that I started and finished school in America, that English is my first language, that I still live in New York. None of it." Najla was encouraged and supported to turn her life story into a play in 2009. And the play into a book in 2013. She performed the play Off-Broadway for two months and continued to perform it at high schools and colleges all over the country (pp. 253-54).

On writing her story, Najla has managed to interrelate the personal and the public lines in which the fabric of her narrative was interwoven. She realized when she began performing that people were willing to listen to her own stories which were sad, funny, embarrassing, and atypical

yet also universal in its complexity; having a mixed-up identity actually makes it easier to relate to a larger and more varied group of people. In addition, being able to laugh at my younger self ...allowed people to learn along with me, and rest easy in their confusion and varying degrees of perplexity and apathy over the problems in the Middle East. (p.254)

Every single time Najla performed the play, she was "petrified of being hated, ridiculed, misunderstood, belittled, and heckled." She chose high schools though they are "particularly terrifying" because of the students' different " socio-economic class, age, religion, and gender." College campuses, on the other hand, "are also filled with students who read and think about and study the Middle East critically, and do not easily accept the stereotypes and images they are fed by the mainstream media. (Thanks in part to [her]dad's scholarly contributions" (p.255). 'Daddy' was proud of her performances, and told her a few days before his death, "That's the future. You guys-you've got it. And sort of that idea that art was somehow going to be the way out" (www.npr.org, 2013). He was fond of Theodor Adorno's quote, "For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live" (Shammas, 2003). Thus, Najla Said decided to perform her own story in her solo show, *Palestine*, then developed it into this memoir in which she declares by the end that she finally felt like she "had a place on this earth"(p.258).



Though Najla lost her ‘larger-than-life’ father, the overpowering figure, advocate, and her best friend in the family, writing this book helped her know her mother. She admitted in an interview that she loved her mother, with whom she did not have major issues. She added, “it’s definitely been the blessing of writing this book is getting to know my mom and learning that maybe I’m a great woman because of my mom too” (dianerehm.org.,2014).

Conclusion:

In *Looking for Palestine*, that imaginary homeland of ‘Palestine’ constructed by Najla’s parents and the media became a reality. However, she believed that, as her father did, the native land transcends all the national geographical boundaries, recreating for her a new communal identity shaped by that steeped universal humane sense of belonging. Najla’s visit with her father to Palestine, which used to be the heart of all his deep historical, political and intellectual traumas, shaped a radical moment of reconfiguration of the homeland for both the father and the daughter. As Najla’s father did, she transcended the filiative relationship with the ancestral land, though deeply rooted, to the affiliative relationship, standing for the causes of justice and peace, and human rights. During that visit, she navigated through different chronotopic markers with critical consciousness of the homeland, to investigate and identify the friction between filiative and affiliative relationships. She no longer ignores or avoids but is ready to confront and liberate herself of all national prejudices of both the homeland and the host land.

Najla wrote this memoir to pour herself out, trying to heal all her trembling anxieties, tensions, and unresolved conflicts. She was courageous enough to tell her stories of her anorexia, making fun of her flaws, bringing the stories of her family’s struggles to the stage, and in a book. She shared these experiences with students in high schools and colleges, who are the exact age when she struggled and suffered to confront her own identity by reassuring them that they are not alone in their journey. In this memoir, Najla Said was not just looking for Palestine; she was reconstructing her fragmented identity into a whole that enjoys love, peace, and art. Her Palestine was the peace she was looking for inside first, and theatre and writing were her enunciation and medium of expression to find both. She also managed to liberate herself from the heritage of ‘that larger-than-life Edward Said, though proud of it, reclaiming him as her own loving ‘Daddy.’ This artistic engagement of performing and writing was a healing one. Najla found herself, her own individual voice, and her mother; Najla was able to reconnect with her people, cause, and culture, captivated by the stories of her parents, feeling proud of their humanism, achievements, and their fight to defend their Arab identity.

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