

The Experience of Marginalisation in the Process of Discovering Identity in *Out of place* and *Persepolis*

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Abstract The article focuses on the issue of marginalisation in Edward Said's *Out of Place* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. In these autobiographical texts both writers try to express the process of discovering and naming their identities. It seems that bell hooks' concept of the privileged position of the margin is applicable to their narrations. Both Satrapi and Said witnessed historical events and in their texts they try to convey their testimonies. Themes of childhood and memory are explored differently in their stories but they both underline its significance. The article tries to show in what way the experience of marginalisation affected their emerging individualities, contributed to building their inner freedom and independence and influenced their notion of identity.

Key words marginalisation; Said; Satrapi

Nowadays, the issue of marginalisation is a widely discussed problem of literary theory, especially exposed in cultural, postcolonial, feminist and gender studies. It is connected with the issue of identity and experience, as well as with the Standpoint Theory based on the work of Michel Foucault. The concept of marginalisation as a privileged position is articulated in the works of Bell Hooks. According to her, the greatest advantage of being situated on the margin is a different, broader perspective. It is rather a place of possibility than a place of humiliation (hooks: 52).

Edward Said's *Out of Place* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* are unique and exceptional works. Similar in concentrating on the period of childhood and growing up, both can be read as an example of a Bildungsroman. The first one is a memoir, the second—an autobiographical graphic novel successfully presented in the film adaptation in 2007. Said and Satrapi both seem to trace in memory the painful process of discovering and shaping their individuality and identity. They learn how to be

bicultural and, at the same time, how to keep their original heritage.

Said started working on *Out of Place* in 1994, shortly after he was diagnosed with leukemia. In this extraordinary piece of literature he returns to his childhood spent in the Middle East. Born in Jerusalem in 1935 to Palestinian parents, he was raised in Egypt and Lebanon and witnessed the establishment of Israel in 1948. His family belonged to an Evangelical Church, therefore he was perceived as a representative of a minority within Christian minority in the surroundings dominated by Islam. At the age of fifteen he moved to the United States, where he graduated from Princeton University in 1957 and earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1964. He was University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University until his death in 2003.

Said always accentuated the exceptional quality of his personal experience and *Out of Place* can be read as his testimony. Evoked memories are combined with reflections and assessments of the past based on observations made from the perspective of the present moment. A very introspective story of gaining knowledge about the world and himself is conveyed in the style of a confession.

Said's experience of marginalisation was complex and multi-faceted. Before moving to America, he attended nine schools mostly in Egypt, including British Gezira Preparatory School and Cairo School for American Children. In every school he had difficulties with adaptation and mostly felt left out as an outcast. He confesses with sadness that he does not remember any pleasant moment with his classmates and any uplifting words from his teachers. Vulnerable, afraid of sudden ostracism and intimidated by the confidence of his American colleagues, he tried to hide his skills during the lessons in the Arabic language. As most children at the age of ten, he did not want to be excluded from the group and longed for acceptance. His frequent efforts to adjust were mostly failures and he did not succeed in gaining friends and appreciation from his teachers. Marginalised at school, Said started to reconsider himself in terms of nationality. Inside he felt confused with his Arabic heritage and his American false identity and for a long time he did not know how to cope with this problem. At the Cairo School for American Children he wanted to conceal his Palestinian roots and put it away deep into the abyss of unconsciousness, push it away into the shadow of the Freudian id. This strategy seriously affected his personality and as a result he became even more isolated, confused, timid, insecure and weak in his own eyes. This bitter feeling of humiliation and low self-esteem changed him. He was aware that the outside image was a projection of his desires and covered his fear of rejection. In *Out of place*, Said describes situations when unexpectedly from this artificial mask of American identity an inner strength emerges. According to him, it was something more than an Arabic heritage, it was rather human dignity and a strong

conviction of injustice of his situation by comparison to others.

Said's double identity was exposed especially in the juxtaposition of his name and surname. He tried to hide this odd combination of the typical British name 'Edward' and the surname of Arabic origins by pronouncing the latter in a more American way: 'Sigheed'. This binary opposition mirrored the black and white evaluation of the world typical for the colonised person. However, the division between 'good American culture' and 'worse Arabic tradition' was not so clear for him. Several times he states that his inner self was somehow free from national and cultural labels. He found himself completely independent in the field of music, a universal language serving as a kind of cure for strict categories of politics, nationality and social functions. Music, as a form of escapism from prejudiced assessments, was to him the divine uniting force which transcended imposed divisions.

In his youth, Said suffered because of his double Arabic- American identity and then he had two ways of solving that problem: accept his bicultural upbringing or try to conceal his Arabic origins. From *Out of place* we learn that he mostly tended to choose the second option which was for him a certain method of defense. Surprisingly, when he speaks about the issue of languages, he clearly states that as a child he did not know which one was really his own. From the beginning, it was a rather harmonious and smooth coexistence of both. English was an official language and Arabic was more intimate and personal and served the purpose of communication especially with his mother. This bilingual experience affected his maturing individuality, depriving him of making sufficient bonds with the surroundings. It always reminded him of the fact that he was not wholly from the place he was born and that part of him was different from the tradition he was raised into. Similarly, the juxtaposition of his name and surname was a sign of multiple identity and underlined his otherness vis a vis both American and Arabic culture.

As Jacek Gutorow stated, the major theme of Said's works is the motif of identity threatened by various ideological systems (Gutorow 127). From the memoir of the Palestinian writer it seems that his evolving individuality was marginalised by the oppressive structure of school, nation and family. Fond memories of his parents are combined in *Out of Place* with assessments made from the perspective of time. As a youth he always felt pressure at school as well as at home. The tension between the center and the margin was mirrored in the relationship between dominating and overprotective parents and the son who was under their influence.

This experience of marginalisation was probably a crucial factor in the process of discovering his individuality and naming his identity. The deprivation of the right to express himself freely when he was young seems to be the driving force of Said's narration. The oppression that he noticed and recognized in constructs like

family, society, nation and the system of education was perhaps the starting point of his studies on colonialism, which finally were presented in *Orientalism*. In *Out of Place* Said explores the issue of alienation, dependency and the enslaved mind. By approaching his youthful experiences, he wants to reinterpret and understand his life. It seems that his memoir is the expression of the hidden need to give meaning to the past. The marginalisation he experienced himself allowed him to examine this problem from an inside perspective and make it the object of his thorough reflection and study. The resulting distance enabled him to look critically and without emotional involvement on the issue of the margin.

As Bell Hooks stated, the experience of marginalisation can be enriching as long as it allows one to gain a different view and a more empathetic attitude. Said, as a person of double identity, was especially interested in the writers of the 'Third World'. He was also involved in the issue of the independence of Palestine, which he described by using colonial rhetoric. After the events that took place in 1948, he strongly felt as a Palestinian and heartily devoted himself to defend the interests of people who shared his fate.

In *Out of Place* the motif of insomnia is especially exposed. It symbolises the state between dream and reality, childhood and adulthood, the present and the past, life and death. Said's memoir is an attempt to catch the moment from the passing of time and make it infinite. This state of uncertainty and being somewhere "between", typical for insomnia, also made him reflect on the issue of identity. Said says explicitly that he prefers perceiving identity as a concatenation of freely flowing streams rather than a stable and solid construct. It is his choice to live between worlds, on the verge of cultures. Paradoxically, it appears that the marginalisation he experienced as a youth was enriching in that sense that it helped him to achieve inner freedom. It encouraged him to reconsider the problem of rejection and exile in terms of the human condition. The state of marginalisation, as painful as it is, takes away the comfortable feeling of confidence and instead gives one humility and an awareness of limitations. Said's awareness of mortality, the temporal boundaries of life and the impossibility of possessing anything echoes in his ideas about the fragility of identity. Destructive feelings from the past seem to change and are transformed into this concept of personal freedom. The identity emerging from *Out of Place* is rather a mosaic and a collection of many different elements. It appears that he found fulfillment in the work at the university and in the process of writing. In his text *Reflections on Exile* Said discusses the notion of home in modern times, commenting on the works of Theodor Adorno. According to this philosopher, the only possible "home" nowadays is the act of writing itself. Similarly, Ryszard Nycz in his article states on the basis of Polish literature that there are two types of exiles: the one completely isolated and the

other who despite isolation reaches for universal culture and always looks for the universal element in the local (Nycz 22). In this typology, Said would be a definite representative of the second option.

Said's essay *Reflections on Exile* is a good illustration to *Out of Place* and allows him to perceive the experience of marginalisation as an enriching factor, despite all the costs and negative aspects. His memoir is written from the point of view of a person who accepted his bicultural heritage and became aware of the instability of any forced and imposed structure. Said speaks about "contrapuntal consciousness" as a distinctive feature of people of multiple identity and stresses its beneficial role in improving the ability to sympathize (Said 148).

In his intimate and insightful memoir, Said makes an effort to understand his life and to capture something which once was marginalized. From the point of view of a professor of literature at Columbia University and author of *Orientalism*, he looks back on his turbulent days with the hermeneutic wisdom to read life as a whole and to judge the past with the indulgence of the present moment.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* is an autobiographical graphic novel presented in the form of a black and white comic-book. Satrapi's story of childhood and youth was also captured in the film adaptation in 2007. The story about the Iranian girl Marji starts with the outbreak of the Islamic revolution in Tehran. This event changes the life of ten years old girl, who from now on witnesses the dramatic events of the uprising. From the history of Iran told by her father, she learns that her country was always the object of invasion and the imperial influence of the West. The events of the revolution enlarge her awareness of the injustice and make the process of her growing up more rapid and dynamic. Although a child, she wants to participate in the protests and gain knowledge about the situation. She sees people as equal and does not understand economic differences in society. Sensitive to injustice, she observes with fear the repressions after the downfall of the Shah and the war between Iran and Iraq.

Marji is an example of many children whose childhood was invaded by politics and history. She is deprived of a normal life and the right to grow up in peace. What is worse, she is constantly afraid for the lives of her dear ones as much as of her own, especially after the death of uncle Anoosh and the departure of her best friends. These experiences shape her views and emerging individuality. She becomes courageous enough to point out the lies of her teachers and openly speaks about political prisoners and executions. Because of the growing danger, parents decide to send Marji to Vienna where she encounters a new culture and a new way of life very much different from the one she used to know. She attends school where she meets new friends and notices her own otherness and maturity.

In Austria she is often insulted because of her nationality. Disrespectful remarks

about Iranian people deeply hurt her pride and dignity, but at the same time help her discover anew her identity, which emerges in a painful way as a form of rebellion. There are situations when in answer to malicious comments she cries out loud that she is proud to be Iranian. Many times Marji regrets the fact that she has been trying to conceal her nationality to gain people's acceptance and has a bitter feeling of betraying her Iranian roots.

For Marji, who comes from a very restrained culture, the uninhibited behavior of her colleagues is something shocking and confusing. Sexual liberation and drug use are for her the symbols of Western culture- the same culture that she used to cherish as a child in Iran. She is confused and tantalized by the notion of freedom she encounters in Vienna. To fulfill the expectations of the group, she reaches for the drugs but deep inside she has a feeling of betraying herself. The girl makes desperate efforts to assimilate to the surroundings and she wants to be a part of it and, at the same time, she feels that she does not fit there. Marji goes through painful experiences and major disappointments just to be, in the end, wrongly accused of being a drug dealer and become homeless. After living for two months on the street, the girl ends up in the hospital where she is found by her parents. These traumatic events make her realise that she does not belong to Austria and after taking into consideration her health and mental state, she finally decides to return to Iran.

It appears that Marji experienced marginalisation in Austria, as well as at home in Iran. In Vienna she felt as a stranger because of a different cultural paradigm and in Iran because of the political situation and restrictions connected with religion. In Iran her individuality was marginalised from childhood on. During the Islamic revolution she was forced as a little girl to wear a veil, later on she witnessed how disrespectful the representations of the regime towards Iranian women were. Marji also suffered from the changes imposed on the system of education. The revolution and the war made it impossible for her to grow and share a normal life with her family. Instead, she had to look for possibilities for education in Europe, and in a way her stay in Vienna was enriching because it gave her a chance to compare. From a distance, Marji noticed the oppression of the patriarchal culture in Iran, where she rebelled against the restrictions connected with looks and dress. Marji's mother wanted her to be an independent, strong, educated woman and was very disappointed with her daughter's decision to marry at a young age just to adjust to the customs and expectations of others. The girl felt unhappy in that marriage and, although it was not popular and well perceived in her country, she decided to divorce. She was aware that there was no future for her in Iran where freedom was constantly jeopardized and she finally left the country permanently.

In Marji's life, the experience of marginalisation seemed to be the starting

in *Out of place* and *Persepolis*/ Magdalena Stola

point of the process of discovering her identity as an Iranian woman. The fact that she conveys her story in French is meaningful and gives her a safe distance. When in France a taxi driver asks her where she comes from, her reply is clear and strong. No one knew how long the journey was she had to make to be able to give such an answer. It captures the entire spectrum and range of feelings and experiences: war, humiliation, fear, alienation, marginalisation, pride, courage and rebellion. By accepting her identity she also made a certain choice. She chose to be true to herself and live without fear and in that sense she truly chose freedom.

Both Edward Said and Marjane Satrapi deal with the problem of marginalisation. Despite all painful experiences, the fact of being situated on the margin gave them also a broader perspective, inner freedom and make them more sensitive to any kind of injustice. It also enlarged their conception of identity. They both reach back to their childhood with the aim to embrace their lives and the process of writing and leading narration seems to be a way to understand something they could not comprehend as children. It is also a form of acceptance of their fate. By sharing their experiences they made use of their double heritage in the best way they could.

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