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**DEPICTION OF FEMININE CONCERNS IN ZAINAB SALBI'S  
'BETWEEN TWO WORLDS'**

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**Abstract:** The paper explores on the depiction of the feminine concerns and on women's survival, resilience and fortitude during times of conflict. During such situations, women strive to unravel their strengths and their grit by upholding their values, identity and culture. As life becomes harsh and unpredictable during conflicting situations, women battle through odds to grapple life with faith and endurance. The paper attempts to explore the concerns faced by the women characters in Zainab Salbi and Laurie Becklund's brilliant autobiographical memoir *Between Two Worlds: Escape from Tyranny: Growing Up in the Shadow of Saddam*. Living in a constant state of fear and surveillance, women grapple for safety and security to subsist within the crude dictates of their masochistic societies. It is in such a context that Zainab speaks on the untold issues of fear and agony faced by her family during their association with Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi formidable dictator aka. as Amo. The paper specifically focuses on the issues faced by the female characters, their distressingly painful situations, their life before and after the conflict and how it affected the intimate recesses of their personal spaces.

**Keywords:** Survival, Conflict, Resilience, Fortitude, Feminine, Grit, Grapple, Masochistic, Identity

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From times immemorial, women were held in high esteem as the representatives of cultural and ethnic values. The stereotypical representation of women as the '*Angel in the house*'<sup>1</sup> got tarnished during times of conflict, as wars often led to increasing incidents of violence, tensions

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<sup>1</sup> Phrase taken from Coventry Patmore's poem of the same title '*Angel in the House*' which indicated women as a symbolism of nobility, grace and charm.

and domestic adversities. Women in conflict zones were often demoralized and abused with a motive to degrade, humiliate and terrorize the nation as a whole, thereby affecting the physical and emotional health of women. Women were often attacked ruthlessly and were subjected to brutal acts of violence, thereby marginalizing and depriving them. They lost their identity and became insecure; and the very question of survival became painful. Most often, women became victimized and traumatized as survivors of war, filled with horrific and gruesome war experiences and thus they lived for the rest of their lives with memories of pain and even coerced into prostitution, forced labour, dominant relationships or forced marriages.

The paper aims to analyse the depiction of feminine concerns as seen in Zainab Salbi's memoir *Between Two Worlds: Escape from Tyranny: Growing Up in the shadow of Saddam*. The paper attempts to study the life and situations faced by the women characters in the autobiographical memoir and how they lived their lives in a constant state of fear and surveillance. They grappled for safety and security to subsist within the crude dictates of the masochistic societies. Zainab empathizes and supports women who survived troubles and agonies during times of conflict. In her book, Zainab expresses her admiration for women who keep life going in a state of normalcy amidst the war. She states that war was the only catalyst which triggered changes in the static pre-defined roles of women.

Women faced social isolation and emotional trauma, when they had to voice out the injustice meted out to them. They often had to silently endure the traumatic experiences and live with those memories for the rest of their lives as they feared threat to their lives. Zainab Salbi in one of the Ted Talk sessions titled '*Women, Wartime and the Dream of Peace*' expresses her views on how the loss of identity and the pain of being deprived by the loved ones were the most painful and embarrassing situations faced by women.

“...There is also the fear of losing loved ones, and I think that's even worse. It's too painful. You don't want to think about it. But I think the worst kind of fear is the fear – ... ‘The fear of losing the ‘I’ in me ... It's like dying from inside out. ... ‘It's not about the fear of one death ,’ she said, ‘sometimes I feel like I die 10 times in one day’(04:26)

Women in conflict zones became silent victims, as they were doubly marginalized – by the oppressors, as well as by the male pariahs of their own societies and families. They became weak and subdued when the men folk in their own domestic spheres vented out their frustrations, thereby aggravating the sufferings of womanhood. Zainab Salbi through her personal and intimate memoir *Between Two Worlds* narrates the conflicting situations in which

her family lived before and after the Iran-Iraq conflict. In spite of all the trials and tribulations which her family endured, she emerged as a victor- from a victim to a strong global activist voicing and fighting for the rights of women and for the oppressed women survivors of war.

Born and brought up in an affluent family, Zainab suffered the traumatic memories of war as she had to witness the gripping pain and terror inflicted by Saddam Hussein to separate and disintegrate her family. She describes her rebellious teenage life and how it transformed her into a public figure who fought each day to overcome the fear and frustrations of her *silence*.

“...For over a decade, I have gone around the world, meeting victims of war and the awful mass rape, the world seems to accept as an inevitable consequence of war. Seeing the criminal patterns behind such violence, I began encouraging women to break their silence and speak about so that their oppressors could be punished. Yet, I have been unable to break my own.” (04)

“...how long would women continue to be complicit in their sufferings by remaining silent” (05)

Bell Hooks in her book *Taking Back* explains how silence in the woman is often considered a sign of feminine submissiveness to a patriarchal authority. She emphasizes on how women should fight to *voice* for themselves even during times of oppression.

“...women share a common speech or that all women have something meaningful to say at all times. However, for women within oppressed groups who have contained so many feelings – despair, rage, anguish -who do not speak...As objects, we remain voiceless-our beings defined and interpreted by others.” (12)

The paper focusses on the feminine concerns faced by the three strong characters in the memoir- Bibi, Alia and Zainab- the author herself. The book narrates how these women endured the most traumatic and disturbing of their lives and how they unravelled their strengths to endure the odds of life with faith and endurance. Zainab Salbi in her memoir reveals the pain and the insecurities which she faced in life and how she struggled to overcome her own fears and failures. To know more about Zainab's life, it is essential to know about her parents her early life and her childhood to understand how the Iran Iraq conflict and the influence of a powerful dictator wrecked damage to their lives.

Zainab's father was the personal pilot of Saddam Hussein. From a young age, Zainab lived in fear, when she realized that her family dreaded the presence of the Saddam Hussein, the

President of Iraq in their personal lives. Saddam Hussein was a ruthless dictator, who had the power to save as well to destroy their lives. The family had to hide their apprehensions as they feared oppressions from Saddam Hussein and his Baathist <sup>2</sup>party. Zainab's mother taught her daughter to hide her fear and her apprehensions with a '*plastic smile*'. She advised her daughter to hide and bury her fears within herself as she knew that Amo<sup>3</sup> could read '*one's eyes*'.



From a young age, Zainab understood how to control her fear and resentment against Saddam Hussein

“Every instinct in me-survival, loyalty, anger, horror, resentment, guilt and most of all, fear- conspires to prevent me from speaking Saddam Hussein's name out loud”. (3)

Though Zainab's family hardly had any interest in politics, like most other Iraqi families they were coerced to join the Baathist party, only to retain their jobs and to safeguard their lives. During her early childhood, Zainab felt desperate to see how her mother was forced to part with all her treasures and fine jewellery and donate it as a contribution to the Baathist party. Her mother had to part with her favourite Abbasid coin as a gift to Amo out of her sheer fear. In spite of living the early part of her childhood enjoying the love and affection of her family; Zainab could only witness the stress, depression and insecurities surmounting her family. Young Zainab recollects the poignant memory on how her mother attempted suicide during such a stressful occasion. Relating the bits and pieces of all these painful memories together, Zainab understood how her family started drifting apart.

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<sup>2</sup> Baathist party rose into full power and authority in Iraq in 1968. Saddam Hussein was one of the most influential authoritarians in the Baath party as he had full autonomy to influence government employees, military personnel and even had ability to influence governmental decisions at all levels

<sup>3</sup> **Saddam Hussein** was often called as '**Amo**' (which means 'uncle) among his family and inner circle of friends. Amo was also the traditional form of address that Iraqi children use to call male adults.

Zainab was married off at an early age to Fakhri, who was settled in America. Fakhri was a conservative Shia<sup>4</sup> Muslim who detested Saddam Hussein and his tribe Tikrit (refers to the tribe as well as the place where Saddam was born). Fakhri punished Zainab by expressing his hatred towards her caste and her family for their affinity with Saddam Hussein. As Fakhri belonged to the Shia caste he hated Saddam Hussein who belonged to the tribe of Tikrits, as the Tikrits were instrumental in expelling the Shias from their own hometown.

Zainab narrates the pain and troubles which she endured during her stay with Fakhri in her memoir thus:

“I was the daughter of the pilot of Saddam Hussein, and Fakhri was doing to me in bed, what the whole exile community wanted to do to Amo”. (183)

For Zainab marriage was like a leap from the pan to the flaming fire, as Fakhri subjugated her physically and mentally with repeated acts of rape and torturous punishments. Zainab’s words reveal the pain and agony of a helpless woman whose marital life was caught in the quagmire of a community hatred.

“Fakhri, on the other hand, seemed to see me like a kind of mail order bride, like the lonely girl from Iran, like thousands of other young immigrant brides streaming into the United States from other oppressed countries worldwide. I was supposed to be not only obedient and amenable to spousal training, but to be grateful for the opportunity—a toxic mix of American arrogance and Arab masochism”. (182-3)

Zainab Salbi in her book *Between Two Worlds* states how rape was often used as a war tactic as she became a victim to post-marital rape on multiple occasions.

“Rape was every bit as much a strategy of war as the ethnic cleansing fought with guns, perhaps more so because it didn’t just eliminate individuals, it destroyed whole families and societies...As if women were a battlefield, where two old enemies met to set scores straight”. (218)

The Iran Iraq war made things worse, as Zainab could not contact her family and relatives. Living all by herself, she felt liberated and happy as she was freed from the clutches of Amo.

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<sup>4</sup> Shia and Sunni are the two major denominations of Islam which formed after the death of the Islamic prophet Muhammad in AD 632. Sunni Muslims formed the majority of the Muslim population and Shias were a minority group who belonged to the Twelver tradition.

Zainab had to face the pain of seeing her family drifting apart, as her parents and her siblings got separated.

Zainab's second marriage to her long-time friend Amjad, whom she had met during her stay in America was a happy one. Amjad was quite understanding and supportive to Zainab, but her life in Iraq, her painful memories about her family and her fear of Amo always haunted her throughout her life. Zainab realized the troubles faced by her mother, as she was forced to host and even attend the parties hosted by Saddam Hussein's wife, Sajida and there were instances when Zainab had to entertain Saddam Hussein's daughters, as they feared the powerful dictator. Saddam's sons Uday and Qusay were evil and notorious for their heinous crimes and they ill-treated women in the most degrading manner by raping and mutilating women. The only hideout for Zainab was to escape from the very sight of these oppressors. Friendship was the only tactic which Zainab and her family could employ to protect themselves from these dreadful mercenaries. Zainab laments about her plight by stating thus

“Never having mastered the art of making such dangerous thoughts fly out of my brain as my mother tried to teach me, I learned to hide them”. (118)

**Alia**, mother of Zainab Salbi is one of the most powerful characters in the novel. Alia was a beautiful young woman who enjoyed a blissful marital life with her three kids. She was a loving and affectionate mother and a good daughter to her aged mother Bibi. She was born and brought up in a well-known Shia family in Iran, and later her family settled in Iraq after her marriage. Her husband Basil worked as a pilot to Saddam Hussein's personal jet plane. Though it was a very prestigious job, Alia and her family lived all throughout their lives fearing the oppressive ruler and the harm which Saddam Hussein could inflict on their family. Though Alia and her family tried to manage and retain a safe distance from Amo, they were forced to become friends with Amo. Alia in her notebook narrates an occasion when Amo had sent a rifle to the family as a token of his friendship.

“He talked about friendship that night and how death could be the punishment for any friend who betrays him” (20)

Alia's personal scrapbook revealed her inner self and the insecurities which she faced. She reveals the helplessness of a wife and a mother who lost the control of her own family.

“He (Saddam) had a very charming personality, that made an immense impression on anybody who met him...He always makes sure to spend some time with each couple to

get to know them through their own and part of his strategy is to start first on couples where the wife is particularly beautiful.” (70)

Zainab Salbi recalls how her mother Alia withstood the situations of crisis and stood strong with their family. Alia in her notebook mentioned how Saddam Hussein, on one instance got annoyed with Alia, for her refusal to entertain Saddam’s concubine, Samira in her household. His anger was something that everyone feared, as it might even cost them to lose their lives. Alia could never express her fears about Saddam Hussein, as she feared that her family could be harmed. Alia’s notebook recordings were painful testimonials to the fears and insecurities which she faced.

“The games he (Saddam) played between friends to spread fear and suspicion among all of us, his nightly visits, his flirting with the wives, the inability to refuse him any request, for it may cost one’s life, among many other things led some to leave the country.”(91)

The initial rift in Alia’s family occurred when Basil, her husband told the family that the government forced Iraqi husbands to divorce their Iranian wives and they were encouraged by paying them 2000 dinars. Basil however had to discuss these with Amo for he feared deportation, as Alia and her forefathers were from Iran. With the consent of the President Saddam Hussein, a ‘special file’ was made on this behalf where Basil and his family were exempted from this on Amo’s special consideration.

There were times in Alia’s life when the mother and daughter shared a remarkably close friendship, as Alia confided her fears and her inner turmoil to her daughter. Alia’s life became miserable when she and Basil had regular disagreements regarding issues concerning Basil’s official duties as Saddam Hussein’s personal pilot; for she often feared that he might go to any extent to harm her family. She longed to escape from the clutches of Amo, but she often felt disappointed and frustrated to understand that escape was only a distant dream and could never turn out to be a reality. Zainab’s recollections of a few events from her early life prove the same.

“I remember my parents arguing ...My father would fly away, and I would be left to watch my mother beat her wings around her, alternately trying to escape her cage and feather her nest”. (95)

Though Alia lived all her life fearing Amo, she always wanted her daughter to be free and secure. It was only when her mother Alia was nearing her death, Zainab got to know that her mother insisted on a hasty marriage with Fakhri, only to protect her from the lusty eyes of Saddam, whom was a known womanizer, as he and his sons were notorious in harming any woman whom they wanted. The only way in which Alia could rescue her daughter was to get her married off, as far as possible, far away from the sight of the cunning oppressor.

Alia conducted Zainab's marriage to Fakhri in a hasty manner as she wanted to ensure that her daughter migrated to America with her husband and she was in safe custody. She always feared the safety and wellbeing of her daughter and it was during the last stages of her life, that Alia revealed about her fears to her daughter.

“I had to get you out, habibiti<sup>5</sup>...He wanted you, Zainab...In his eyes, you were a woman”. (240)

Alia later felt guilty for conducting a much hasty marriage. Her love and concern for her daughter can be revealed through her letters which she wrote to console her daughter.

“I ask you to remain strong, keep your ethics strong, and do whatever is right. You are a strong woman. Listen to your elders and heed your advice. Keep your self-respect”. (193)

Alia however took the strongest decisions to take control of her life, striving with all her might to stay away from the prying eyes of the dictator. She had to forego her family in order to gain a liberated life. She migrated to Jordan taking with her younger son Hassan, as her elder son Haider lived with her husband in Iraq. Though Alia struggled all throughout her life for her freedom, she never felt empowered, as she lived all throughout her life fearing the dreadful dictator and his fearsome and towering presence in her life. In spite of all this, Alia emerges as a strong woman in the novel. Despite all her adversities, Alia decided to take control of her life and to move ahead. She strived to safeguard herself and her daughter amidst the disturbing and tormenting situations of her life.

**Bibi** was Alia's mother and Zainab Salbi's maternal grandmother. Bibi was a strong personality, a great source of strength and support to Alia and a compassionate and loving grandmother to young Zainab. Though Iran was her hometown, Bibi only had vague memories

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<sup>5</sup> 'Habibiti' was the pet name which Alia used to call her daughter. The word means 'my dear little one.'

of visiting Tehran (Iran) since she lived a great part of her life in Iraq. So, Bibi and her grandparents were all registered as Iraqi residents who claimed to be of 'Iranian origin' (48)

Zainab reminisces the days of her early childhood when Bibi introduced her to the world of adventure, magic, war through the stories and tales from Quran.

“It was from these stories that I drew my earliest lessons about women and men, about being Muslim and being secular, and about war and whatever you call life between wars, which I never knew to be peace”.(22)

Bibi, was a God fearing person, who instilled good values in her grandchildren and remained as a source of emotional support to all her daughters. From her early childhood, Bibi was an orphan who was left in the custodial care of a uncle whose carelessness and negligence left her in utter penury. Bibi got married off at the age of thirteen. Her mother- in-law was a strong matriarch who established her own sewing factory at the dawn of the twentieth century. Young Bibi was trained to be humble and subservient to her mother- in-law. As time passed by, Bibi outlived all the members of her generation and she found solace in religion. She left her palatial bungalow on Tigris and shifted to a humble household in Karbala. She grew up her daughters very well and lived a contended life. Zainab grew up witnessing the strong bond between Alia and her mother Bibi, later this became a strong formative influence on young Zainab, as this intimacy was later reflected in her love and affection towards her own mother. There were times when Alia, as a child would sob and vent out her fears and anguish to her mother.

“I remember ...seeing Mama lying with her head on her mother's lap, the supposedly liberated daughter seeking comfort from an old woman ... (119)

Bibi's death was a painful memory for Zainab as she was a great source of wisdom and strength to Alia and her family. Bibi, the grandmother was a great source of strength and support, as she stood strong amidst all the adversities and supported her daughter and her family.

Zainab's memoir can be described as a woman's quest for her identity, a poignant memoir expressing the pain of separation and a woman's search for truth against the tyranny of dictatorship. It is the first account of modern Iraq by an Iraqi woman who has felt, experienced and suffered under the hands of a dictatorial regime. Her memoir reveals how she longed for the love, warmth and the comfort of her family which she lost at a young age.



***An old picture of Zainab Salbi with her family- Painful reminders of the past***

“The love, the singing, the smiles and the happiness I remembered during the first ten years of my life- all that was gone. Amo had torn my family apart. My mother blamed my father for staying in Iraq and my father blamed my mother for my failed marriage. As for their three children, we were now living in three different countries, all going in different directions, not knowing when we would see each other again, and not knowing why our parents had allowed this to happen to our family”. (194-5)

The first part of the memoir reveals Zainab as a frail and fragile young girl clinging to her mother for the much-needed warmth and comfort. She grew up witnessing the pains and tensions faced by her family and the traumatic experiences of her own life. This later transformed her into a strong woman who was determined to fight against all the odds and extremities of life. The Iran Iraq war, added to the woes of the internal conflict, as Zainab couldn't contact her parents from America, and she had to fend for herself and accept the grim realities of life with utmost determination. Grim memories of the dictator Saddam Hussein still haunted Zainab in her life; yet she managed to resolve the conflict within herself to a considerable extent. The agony of seeing her family drifting and getting shattered was the most painful part of her life.

All these women are strong characters who decided their own lives with their bold decisions. Alia took control of her life by escaping from the tyranny of the dictator-by resolving to live her life in her own terms. Though she had to face the trauma of sacrificing her own family, she proved to be a role model for her own daughter, teaching her to fight the odds of life with determination and endurance. Bibi resolved to fight her own battles within the innermost recesses of her personal spaces by supporting and caressing her troubled daughters and by offering them with strength and fortitude. Zainab fought her life with all her might as she had

to move from a physically abusive relationship to transforming herself to become a global ambassador for peace and security. The resolve to subsist within the crude dictates of the masochistic societies and the tenacity of the characters even during times of conflict were the most endearing aspects of these women characters. They emerge as valiant heroines, who use all their might to fight and to re-create their fragmented identities. Their endurance, perseverance and their undying spirit for liberation are some of the positive traits in the characters. The female characters fought and struggled for the battles within their own domestic spaces, as they had to fight against male domination and oppression imposed on them by a cruel masochistic society. They strived to restore and re-build their lost identities and strive to reclaim their lost cultural values, determined to liberate themselves from the shackles of patriarchy. They strived to withstand the crisis and conflicts within themselves and within the social system of which they are part and parcel. Bell Hooks, the Afro American writer in her epoch-making book 'Talking Back' narrates how women had to fight the oppressions within themselves in conflict zones:

“It is necessary for us to remember, as we think critically about domination, that we all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, wound ...It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppressor within that we must resist –the potential victim within that we must rescue- otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, for liberation.”(20-21)

The characters fortify themselves with grit and endurance, thereby acquiring an inner strength. They understand that there is a point to where fear and tyranny can take control of human lives, later the mind takes the stern resolve to face the situations with utmost stoicism.

To conclude, it would be appropriate to quote the words of Zainab Salbi (*Between Two Worlds*) who becomes a role model for womanhood by stating her resolve to face life with utmost stoicism 'I have taken a vow to myself never to let anyone hurt me or control me again'. (199)

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