

**Discovering the "Self" and  
Cultural Identity In Miriam  
Ali's Autobiography**

**Dr. Abdulhafeez Qasim Turkistani**

Umm Al-Qura University

## بدون رحمة: معاناة أم ضد العبودية الحديثة ١٩٩٥ للكاتبة: مريم علي

### ملخص البحث :

( بدون رحمة: معاناة أم ضد العبودية الحديثة ١٩٩٥) هي السيرة الذاتية للكاتبة البريطانية مريم علي ، ذات الاب باكستاني و الام البريطانية. بدأت علاقتها مع رجل يمني اسمه مثنى محسن ، حيث عاشا سويا و انجبت منه اطفالا. وتعاستها بدأت عندما ارسل محسن اثنين من ابنائها ، أحمد و ليلي ، الى اليمن ولم تسمع خبرا عنهما لعدة سنين. بعد ذلك سافر اثنين اخرين من ابنائها ، زينة و نادية ، لليمن لقضاء الاجازة ، ولكن اتضح بعدها انهما تزوجتا من يمنيين بترتيب من ابوهما. عندها بدأت مريم بالنضال من اجل استقلاليتها و البحث عن حرية ابنائها. ومن خلال هذه التجربة تعرضت لكثير من الاحداث الغريبة والتي ادت الى انها تختار طريق حياتها بنفسها.

بالرغم من ان هذه السيرة الذاتية تظهر معاناة الام لتحرير ابنائها ، الا ان هنالك الكثير من الصراعات الاجتماعية وتعميم الصور الاجتماعية عن العرب و حضارتهم. الجدير بالذكر ان الكاتبة كانت تساعدها كاتبة بريطانية بيضاء اسمها جينا وين والتي ساعدتها في كتابة و اظهار قصتها. في كتابتها لسيرتها الذاتية ، مريم علي استعرضت ماضيها و لكن انطباعها الشخصي الحاضر لا بد وانه اثر على كتابتها لسيرتها الذاتية. في هذا البحث اقوم بتحليل شخصية مريم كشخصية في قصتها و التغيرات الكبيرة التي تعرضت لها و تأثير الشخصية الحاضرة للكاتبة في رواية قصتها .

## Abstract :

*Without Mercy: A Mother's Struggle Against Modern Slavery* (1995) is an autobiography by a British woman, Miriam Ali, who was of a mixed race; her father was Pakistani and her mother was British. She was involved with a Yemeni, Muthana Muhsen, to move in and have children. Her misery started when two of her children, Ahmed and Laila, were sent by their father to Yemen and never heard of for many years. Later two of her teen-age daughters, Zana and Nadia, were sent to Yemen for a vacation. They ended up marrying Yemenis in Yemen and their father was behind their marriage. Miriam started to fight for her independence and her children's freedom. She had experienced unusual events which lead her to choose her own way of life .

Although this autobiography describes the mother's struggle to free her children, there are a lot of cultural contention and stereotype of the image of the Arabs and their culture. The author is supported by a white British co-writer, Jana Wain, who helped her in bringing her story out. In writing her autobiography, Miriam Ali presented her past life, but her present "Self" must have influenced her writing. In this paper I examine and analyze Miriam's identity, as a character in this autobiography and the drastic changes she has gone through, and her other "self" in narrating it .

## Introduction :

It is interesting to read other people's autobiographies.

This interest is doubled when it comes to the exotic East. Autobiography was represented in literature as beautiful, mysterious, and interesting.

But this exotic nature becomes problematic to some of those who are involved with the people from the east. For them, in contemporary literature, it is not anymore exotic and pleasing. Instead, it relates to many political, social, cultural, and religious contentions. In this paper I refer to an autobiography written by Miriam Ali and Jana Wain, *Without Mercy: A Mother's Struggle against Modern Slavery* (1995).

By Just looking at the cover of the autobiography (a veiled woman), and the title, using controversial issues, we are intrigued to have a glimpse. In fact this was the reason I picked it up in the first place.

The way it is presented indicates its immediate effects on the reader. In other words, the cover of the autobiography brings immediate attention to the Islamic cover with the partly visible eyes of a sad woman; reading it brings emotional and personal support .

This autobiography is about Miriam Ali, a half British /half Pakistani woman. She lived and was raised, after her father's death, by her mother and stepfather.

She came across a Yemeni, Muthana Muhsen, or Fred as she preferred to call him. He expressed his love for her and succeeded in making her think of him as her "Arabian knight" (Ali 4) riding on "a white horse". She lived with him and bore him seven children.

Her misery started when two of her children, Laila and Ahmed, were sent to Yemen and never heard of for many years.

In 1980 two of her teen-age daughters, Zana and Nadia (16 and 15 years old, respectively) were sent to Yemen for a vacation. Their mother heard later that they were married off to Yemenis.

Muthana claimed that they were Yemenis and he knew better what was good for them. But this was not accepted by Miriam who started her fight to bring them back to England.

This fight lasted for many years which involved the British and Yemeni governments and the media. Decision-making becomes crucial and controversial. Mariam and Zana

have to choose freedom from their husbands and away from their patriarchal systems; but Nadia, who decided to stay in Yemen, has chosen her family for freedom and the European culture. Miriam's story attracted sympathy and support which resulted in bringing Zana back to England in 1988, abandoning her small boy, Marcus, in Yemen. But Miriam never gave-up on her other daughter (Nadia), and tried with Zana to reach all possible means to bring her back .

In this paper I am interested in analyzing Miriam's character, the sacrifices she made, the developing of the "Self", and the social contention and identity.

She develops a certain identity where she has to change and choose her future. She starts as a "naïve virgin" who accepts her "Arabian prince" and decides to move-in with him, but then goes through many stages of discovering her "Self".

Her autobiographical "Self" becomes important in writing this story. Rewriting her story from a present memory of a past life defines the new aspect of her autobiography. On the other hand, the social, political, and cultural aspects in this autobiography depict subjective understanding of the autobiographer and the implications of her cultural differences.

Although this story has limited literary reviews but it has, like other similar stories which share similar theme, attracted many people's attention from different points of view .

#### Literature Review :

A journalist for The Observer, Eileen MacDonald, was dispatched to report on Zana and Nadia in 1987. She wrote many reports and a book *Brides for Sale?* (1988) on the Muhsen sisters in Yemen, but this book was criticized by Vron Ware for its subjectivity.

Ware states that MacDonald's book was "written as a breathless account of her mission as a journalist, and therefore full of subjective observations that provide atmosphere and suspense; her report manages to reinforce ideas about the backwardness of Arab cultures through reporting certain stereotypes of masculinity and femininity" (135).

This indicates the mingling of fact and fiction in the journalist's report and the influence of her cultural background and profession.

Vron Ware demands the feminists to focus on reading such journalist's book and "to consider how a feminist analysis

would interpret the symbolic meanings that these narratives of culture and conflict may have in contemporary British society" (131).

Looking at such books requires an attentive objectivity to verify fact from fiction.

Betty de Hart gives a review of the ways these autobiographies were received.

Such stories received many positive European reviews, patronizing them as western heroines of women's rights and fighters for their children's freedom.

On the other hand, some organizations and people, whose countries and cultures were criticized in these stories, focused on the prejudice against Islam on the claim of the superiority of western gender relationships. In addition, the cultural conflict between East and West becomes intriguing.

Betty de Hart depicts the "interracial Romance" between the white European woman and the man from the East, and its negative results and "maternal melodrama".

She emphasizes how these stories reproduce the "discourse on mixed marriages, white femininity and motherhood" (54).



These white women who entered into this type of mixed marriages are called the "Foolhardy ."

The Foolhardy is a western woman who has some feminist inclinations to start with, which is part of her unwillingness to conform. The Orient represents exotic mysteries which both fascinate and repel her.

Her fate is to 'dabble' in things she knows nothing about, and to break the taboos of western society both for herself and her community.

The conduct of the Foolhardy calls for punishment as it threatens to upset the whole system (Hart, Betty 57 ).

According to Betty de Hart, these women deserve to suffer because they put the whole western system under threat.

For the writers of these stories, she says, the "main goal of writing....besides working through their experiences, is to warn other women of what might happen if they marry a foreign, especially Islamic, man" (58).

Jana Wain, in her "Epilogue" to Miriam Ali's autobiography, also warns other European women to be at this risk (Ali 2). But these women fight alone to free their children

from the Islamic culture and bring them back to the "superior" western society .

In her article "Life Stories and Cross-Marriages", Ellettha J.E. Schoustra-Van Benkering emphasizes that these stories "are inevitably of a highly subjective nature and cannot be considered representative of the course of events of cross-cultural or ethnically mixed marriages" (70).

The ex-husbands are not present to tell their side of the story.

She discusses some reasons for the failure of such marriages, and the aspects of cultural differences that those women could not cope with. She presents other positive stories of cultural integrated marriages where European women were able to cope successfully with such cultural differences.

She does not agree to consider those stories as "a warning" to other European women, but she looks at them as a very informative and valuable experiences and information.

Sharing such experiences "can have encouraging aspects as well" and let "the readers draw their own conclusions" (76).

So, neither of the two types of experiences can be considered a representative of the mixed cultural-lives, and

"[i]n order to cope successfully, the ability to tolerate ambivalent situations is a sign of emotional maturity" (76).

This might indicate that Nadia could be considered mature to be able to cope with the Yemeni culture more than her sister Zana (as the paper will show ).

In addition, there were many media reports discussing Miriam's story and the political situations which made it internationally known. The Yemeni Times newspaper reviewed this story in a series to report the other side of the story.

The newspaper reports: "there are two versions of this story, and in order to be completely neutral, we had to bring the two versions without censoring or cutting any details" (13 Jan. 2000).

The newspaper reported, in two parts, an interview with Nadia to clarify the picture of her conditions which was given by her mother and sister.

Zana had published two books of her experience in Yemen Sold: Story of Modern-Day Slavery (1991), and A Promise to Nadia (2000). The Observer, The Guardian, and a

French television program, to name few, took this story into many articles and interviews to publicize for it .

#### Research Method :

In my paper the researcher wants, first, to analyze Miriam's character, the stages she went through and, second, the question of the present "Self" in narrating the autobiography.

To what extent did Miriam change from the naïve "virgin" to become an independent fighter? Why? How? To what extent her present "Self" influenced her in re-telling the past? Is the narrator reliable? How was her old "Self" different from her new "Self"? Was her recording of the past factual? Was the narrator influenced by her British culture and the ghostwriter (co-author)? Was she influenced by politics and the media? Such questions take this individual experience autobiography to a broader sense of cultural and literary subject .

#### Character Analysis :

Miriam, the character (the Self in the past), goes through several stages where her struggle starts within herself to be able to change and be effective. Wain says that Miriam

"experienced a trauma beyond the tolerance of normal people....She had to change everything about herself (1).

She grows from a submissive and passive character to be an aggressive fighter for her freedom and her children's.

She says in an interview with The Independent "I used to be meek and mild, but now I'm like a tiger" (Stuart).

In her first stage, I see her as the naïve virgin whose environment, though western liberal, has not directed her choice of the future life.

At age seventeen she moved out of her family's home to avoid troubles with her stepfather. She wanted "to adapt to being young, free and single in the new 'swinging sixties', a dramatic change from my way of life with my mother and stepfather" (Ali 3-4).

She started her life with a work and a room in a lodging house until she passed and exchanged greetings with a young Yemeni man, Muthana Muhsen, on the stairs.

She was "very shy and more or less ran up the rest of the stairs to the sanctuary of my room ..... To my eyes he was very handsome..... I fell more and more deeply in love with him..... I was enchanted with his aura and personality.

My Arabian knight" (Ali 4).

She was so excited to be with him and to start her life together, though her stepfather was against this racial relationship because he hated Arabs (Ali 5).

In this relationship they lived the western cultural style of life in moving in together and living a typical family life, though not legally married (according to Miriam Ali).

They even had seven children. But it is very questionable that Muhsen had accepted such a style of life bearing in mind his Arabic and Islamic cultural background! Though not devoted Muslim, Muhsen's culture forbids having children out of wedlock. Is there anything that the narrator is not telling us? She says that "the question of marriage was swept under the carpet and somehow it was never mentioned again" (Ali 5), though he was single after divorcing his first wife in Yemen.

As a young woman she wanted to start her own "kingdom" and build her future away from her parents' restrictions.

She was at a young age where she waited romantically for the groom of her choice.

She wanted to have her own life with a new name. Marie Maclean comments on "the assumption of the new name meant the assumption of maturity, the step from being a child in one's father's house to being the mistress of one's own household.

The new name was also the first step towards reproduction; again ambivalently viewed as either a burden or a source of power and authority"(8).

Miriam seems to be going through such kind of a change or a desire to start her own life away from her stepfather's house. In addition, Muhsen "was proving to be a hard-working partner and good provider" (Ali 6).

She made her decision and was responsible for it, though she tried to justify that by her young age: "I was young and impressionable" (4) and "[m]y naivety has to be forgiven" (35); this apology for her act is made by her, later, as an autobiographer. Her partner was considered a good partner and had the essential qualities of the prospect man of her life.

She was infatuated with him; she says: "I was besotted with him and he guarded me possessively and passionately" (4).

She was overwhelmed by his personality and exotic nature. However, her naivety in assuming a heavenly life continued until later stages of her life, though she suffered hardship and Muthana's negligence .

The second stage of Miriam's character is the naive house-wife and working-mother. In this stage she combined the two exhausting roles of the wife and the working mother, as a typical woman in the Yemeni culture. In addition, she was dependent on her partner and followed him in playing the role of that typical Yemeni wife, or a traditional Arab.

She gave birth to seven children although her midwife "voiced her concern for me to Fred (after her fourth child): it was too much to expect that I should have baby after baby.

But he dismissed this as the way of life in his homeland" (7).

He was practicing his cultural demand for having more children while she was so weak in expressing her western cultural concern. This cultural contention exemplifies his "superiority" (as a husband), though a third-world inferior. She was trying to cope with her children's demands and even work in their own fish-and-chip shop.



Working most of the day and night, Miriam became very exhausted and unable to read or understand her partner's future plans for their children .

Her partner, Muthana, had been working for the necessary provisions for his family, but they had many financial problems which put more pressure on them.

Miriam could not find help from her mother, who had twelve children already, because her stepfather refused to associate himself with the Arabs: "You go with a no-good bloody Arab and you will only ever know grief. And you will be alone, because your family will have nothing to do with the likes of him and nothing to do with you" (9).

This shows that even the western patriarchal system gives the man the final word to decide for his woman.

The mother could not help her daughter without her husband's consent.

Miriam began to be miserable and lonely when her partner decided to take the two eldest children, Laila and Ahmed, to Yemen for a break.

She was left alone, for eight months, with the other two children and also pregnant with the fifth child.

He came back without the two children promising her to bring them back later.

She was shocked and cried all night but then she was comforted by Muthana and felt guilty, as naïve she was, to deprive her children of this exotic adventure (13).

She put all her trust in Muthana and never thought that he would lie to her.

Nevertheless, Miriam was suffering and desperate for help.

She did not even have the liberty to make friends.

She was isolated and kept busy with her household work and the shop.

Consequently she had two major nervous breakdowns and was put on tranquillizers; especially when her two other daughters, Zana and Nadia, were sent to Yemen for a vacation and married off to Yemenis.

But within this stage of her life, though she kept giving birth to three more children, Miriam's desperation brought her to self-awakening.

She was already suffering from her inferiority to her partner's superiority.

She realized that Muthana was lying to her, and their children were not coming back. She wished to live her life away from her partner: "I wanted to live my own life with the kids. I could feel this decision forming in the well of my soul.

If only I had the courage, the confidence.... But could I actually do it?" (19) She was dependent on him all her life; it would be a great step in her life to be independent.

Just thinking of the idea of independence is a great change by itself.

She had an inner struggle to free herself and her children from Muthana.

Fortunately, she was forced to depend on herself when he was in Yemen for eight months, and she was able to take care of her household. But she could not be independent as long as he was around.

She realized this "Fred (Muthana) and I had lived together for so long now that I was completely under his influence.

He knew just how to put me down"(27).

This lack of confidence is Miriam's key weakness that she started to realize.

In order for her to be confident she started to look for a home for herself with the children, away from him.

She even decided to be sterilized to stop her continuous pregnancy.

This was a big step in her life; to be able to take decisions by herself. But her weak character put her in dilemma.

Being sick and on tranquilizers created two contradicting personalities: "It felt to me at the time as if I had two people inside my head, ordering me about, telling me what to do.

One said sleep – protect your self from the pain of reality. The other said fight – get up and fight! Face it and fight ... But I knew I had to fight, and the sooner the better" (64).

After reading Zana's letter from Yemen blaming her for not doing anything, if not already part of this plan, Miriam had

awakened to the bitter truth that her daughters were sent to Yemen to be married off to Yemenis.

She believed that her daughters "were victims of Muthana's bloody-minded selfishness. Their only salvation was me.

I had unwittingly allowed them to be tricked into going to Yemen – and the girls blamed me! I had inadvertently allowed Muthana to manipulate the three of us.

Why didn't I see it?" (71) Miriam at this point suffered mental and physical anguish to wake up on this frightening reality.

She suffered her second nervous breakdown after reading Zana's letter .

#### Searching for Independence :

Miriam now enters the third stage of her life searching for her independence.

After recovering from her nervous breakdown, she woke up to face Muthana's confession.

He sent his children to Yemen, and will send, later, the others too, to be brought up in his culture.

He wouldn't accept his daughters to be brought up mingling with black people "sniffing around them" (Ali 86) and become "whores".

She realized the seriousness of her situation and that her passivity would bring more troubles to her future.

After an unwanted sexual intercourse with Muthana, she stood up against him and experienced her first retaliation.

She challenged him and threatened to kill him: "It was the first time I had ever answered him back, let alone threatened him. But I meant it and he could see it" (89).

With this spirit she found help when she met Mary Burchell, a social worker, who helped her in her first steps for freedom and independence .

I admired Mary Burchell so much. I know that if it had not been for her professionalism and cool confidence, I would have remained a zombie, sitting in my home, fretting for the kids, but not actually doing anything, because I had no idea of what to do... I would have probably died, either by my own hand, or by burning out completely (97).

In fact, she even had the courage to retaliate, when Muthana called her an "English whore", and hit him with an

ironing board. Attacking him so furiously, leaping "on top of him, hitting him again and again, tearing at his skin" (101), she could have killed him if it were not for her brother and children to lift her off him. She had changed psychologically and became like an "injured leopard" protecting her children, and eager to do anything.

She later injured him with a beer bottle when he insulted her again as no more than a "sex" object to him (107) .

Her real independence started when she was given, by the British Housing Association, a house, and she moved in without Muthana's knowledge.

She started to look for any possible means to bring her children back. Mary Burchell helped her in the legal procedures to secure her trip to Yemen. Miriam talked to her daughters' fathers- in-law pleading him to bring her daughter back. But neither Muthana nor their in-laws agreed to bring her daughters back. They became their sons' brides.

They insisted that they had Muthana's consent and that they had legal wedding papers and paid a dowry. But Miriam claimed that her daughters were sold and became slaves in Yemen. She even offered to buy them back (123), but her

futile talks forced her to go to Yemen with her son, Mohammed or Mo as she used to call him .

In that exhausting journey she was able to show her real independence in dealing with the foreign environment and search for her daughters. Despite the discouraging attempts by several people, she had great courage and high spirit to succeed in her search.

She travelled through high mountains and scary locations; facing many difficulties that could have discouraged her. Miriam could not be the same character who was so dependent on her partner, Muthana, all those years. She says, "it was a scary journey which took us higher and higher over the mountain pass" (138).

But when she succeeded in reaching her daughters, she was shocked to see them living on a high mountain. She had conflicting feelings: "I was overjoyed to see Zana, but at the same time I was mortified by her living conditions. But I had to grin and bear it for her sake.... But I felt it deeply and it began to eat into my soul like a cancer" (159-160). She met her two daughters (Zana and Nadia) and heard their stories.



She promised to help them: "I just want you both to be happy.

I want you both to be free to choose your own way of life, not be forced to live your father's lie" (165).

She was responding to her instincts as a mother, and encouraged by their living conditions to take them away out of Yemen .

This sense of independence became even aggressive and sarcastic. Miriam was not acting as a woman of a third-world, but rather as a white British person who knew her rights and goals.

She became an aggressive fighter for their rights, in a country where, she assumed, no human rights were practiced, disregarding women's rights per se.

In a meeting with Zana's father-in-law, Abdul Khada, who was questioning the goals of her visit, she was very confident and superior in her reaction:

He raised his eyebrows at me, waiting for an explanation of some sort.

I lit a cigarette and blew smoke in his face.... The girls are mine.

I will get them home, and soon. You 'd better get used to that, Abdul Khada, and pass the message on to those who were conned with You" (Ali 172-73). With that attitude and tone of voice, she challenged him and was able to make him angry. In fact, a woman's challenge would not be tolerated by men like him (as a Yamani).

It would be considered humiliating and a challenge to his masculinity.

Muthana had similar concern of female authority when Miriam described his concern over Mary Burchell's involvement in their case: "To him she (Mary) represented authority. He hated authority. It intimidated him. And worse, of course, Mary was female authority" (110).

Such a patriarchal society would not accept a woman's authority over men. It would be degrading and insulting to their manhood.

Although externally she became strong and tough, she was internally boiling and afraid of failure.

A possible failure or delay in rescuing her daughters put a great pressure on her. She exemplified this in an image of a volcano ready to erupt: "my blood began to boil. An exploded volcano inside me rumbled and flared into flames of pure anger, resentment and hate. I fought to regain control" (207).

She was fighting for temper control over her boiling blood. She was so eager to end all her misery fast, but things did not go as fast as she ideally wished for.

This "volcano" would erupt any minute to show her great anger over those Arabs who refuse to give her way in this ordeal .

Unfortunately she could not control her temper in some situations where, in one instance, she destroyed her home furniture and Christmas tree and scared her children who were unable to calm her down. "The kids stomped out of the house, leaving me writhing on the floor, cursing and screeching amid a litter of tinsel, baubles, broken branches and stars" (210).

She came on the kitchen and the furniture in the lounge with the cabinet. She was really under a great stress and was afraid to go into a third breakdown.

This frustration caused by her loneliness, as Betty de Hart suggested that "the white male saviours are virtually absent in the struggle of the woman" (60).

Miriam did not find a white male to help her and take the burden over her shoulders.

She had to depend on herself and continue her fight alone .

#### Political and Media Influence :

When she could not succeed in her first trials to free her daughters, she was able to take her story to the media and "generate interest and public sympathy" (198).

She started her campaign to bring her daughters back. Different kinds of media, including newspapers, journals, and television, were involved in covering this story such as The Observer, The Independent, The Guardian, and a French television program. She was able to publicize for her cause and show her side of the story.

She succeeded in getting a wide range of interest and many agencies with the two government embassies were involved in this ordeal. Miriam was able to reach every possible means for her cause.

Consequently Miriam succeeded in bringing Zana back to England after she was divorced and left her two-year old child behind. Probably this success gave her more confidence in trying to free Nadia too.

She, with others, formed an organization dedicating herself to bring back such British children. "My life became radically different.

No longer did I just stay in the house brooding" (302). But she, unconsciously, was influenced by her cultural identity that looked down at those "Arab bastards".

She seemed to become racist and arrogant: "If there is one thing I cannot tolerate, it's a smirking Arab" (290).

Zana had done a similar insult on a Yemeni official after her mother's: "From the depths of her soul, Zana summoned every Arabic profanity that she knew and threw them all into Chawki's face in a cobra strike of damnation" (290).

Miriam was furious probably for realizing that the "Arab bastard" outwitted her and she could not succeed in her mission. But interestingly enough, in her last trip to Yemen with her ghostwriter, Jana Wain, Miriam had little more control over her temper, while Jana was expressing her

cultural remarks, as Miriam did before, "shooing" the Yemenis out and calling them "bastards" (340-343). But in another meeting with the Governor of Taiz, Colonel Iryani, he assured Miriam, with a slap to his chest as a sign of personal assurance, that she would be safe in travelling to the city of Ashube, but her reaction was sarcastic when she responded with an other slap to her chest indicating she was also sure that it was not safe (Ali 353).

It would be considered a sign of insult and degradation to him. However, in this trip Miriam started to get more experience in dealing with the Yemenis and their situations .

#### Social Changes :

Meanwhile, she found some British citizens in Yemen whom she identified herself with and later got married to a Syrian man, Abdul (though that was not his first name in full).

She was deeply in love with him. With this love, Miriam has entered the last phase of her character in this autobiography, the newly independent married woman.

She was treated differently, though Abdul was an Arab as her husband:

He was different from any other man I had ever known, Arab or otherwise. I felt the first strings of love.

I really felt that at last there was room in my life for love...I had never, ever, experienced such strong emotion before. I felt alive.... Abdul treated me with respect (361).

This contradiction of her feeling to Abdul (as an Arab) seems to reflect her troubled inner feelings.

She expressed her love for this man and defined it as a new love where there was a room in her heart for this adventure.

Her troubled feelings justified this love and gave her the impression of him as her savior who treated her differently and with respect.

She gave herself the impression that he was different from any other man she knew; that's why she loved him dearly .

Although she loved Muthana "heart and soul" (9), he did not treat her with respect especially after he started to send the children to Yemen. He seemed to have abused her in later years. She suffered a lot by the patriarchal system, even in

England, and was not raised to depend on herself or be treated with respect.

Her trips to Yemen and frustration discouraged her a lot, but after meeting Abdul she says: "Now I had the fuel I needed to carry on. I had a wrong to right and Abdul had made it all so clear to me. And I loved him all the more for it" (365).

She needed a man next to her to support her in this patriarchal system and some one to show her how things work in Yemen. He helped her emotionally and in certain situations. She seems to have Abdul as her emotional and cultural guide in Yemen. In fact, he could have some effect on her present "Self" in writing her autobiography. Miriam's love experience with him must have left its remarks on her identity .

Miriam's last meeting with Nadia, in Yemen, was not what the mother wanted, but rather the daughter emphasized her fear with her husband of the press.

Nadia told her when they were alone: "I am free, Mom" (383) but Miriam could not believe she was.

Miriam could not either make Nadia's husband come to England nor the British embassy to issue him a visa. She was



disappointed by the outcome of these years, but she never gave up.

Miriam still seems to have great hopes for a time when Nadia can come to England and make her own choice either to stay or go back to Yemen.

Eventually when you compare Miriam at the beginning of her autobiography to the one at the end you would obviously see great changes. She said to The Independent: "I won't stop writing to officials until Nadia comes back. I used to be meek and mild, but now I'm like a tiger" (Stuart).

She suffered a lot to stand where she is now and learned more about life and international diplomacy and politics.

Miriam's life experience seemed incredible but she succeeded in changing her life and some others'. She has more control over her character and becomes aware of how things go in the world .

#### Autobiography and the "Self" :

However, this character in the autobiography is, in fact, the view of the other "Self," the present autobiographer.

To what extent can we rely on the autobiographer and distinguish fact from fiction? What is the difference between the two "Selves"? To what extent would cultural differences interfere in recording memory? The second part of this paper will discuss these questions and more.

In an autobiography, we assume that the author is writing an account of his/her life.

The reader, on the other hand, is going to read and test this account with some of the shared experiences, and searches for the truth. "But the author is free and, indeed, is fully expected to explain her perceptions and her interpretations of events. We may question whether we would respond as the author did to a particular situation or we may disagree with some of her action" (Watson 11).

Autobiography, in fact, is a rhetorical narrative written to persuade the reader, using some of the common experiences and grounds, to gain support and sympathy. In her "Epilogue" to Miriam's autobiography, Jana Wain stimulates the reader's emotions to support Miriam in her struggle to free her daughter, Nadia, from "modern slavery": "Imagine, if you will, that is your life, that this has happened to your own flesh and

blood. Imagine a strange man touching her, beating her, raping her.... What would you do? Give up? Forget it?" (390).

Such direct address to the reader should not negate the reader's duty to evaluate the story and define the differences between the two "Selves" in the autobiography and the fact/fiction aspect. It becomes important to know more about the narrator than the autobiography.

Critics of autobiography have "pointed out that the new trend is to shift the critic's interest from 'bio' to 'auto' or from life to self; in other words, less consideration is given to the biographical details than to the development of the inner self" (Alborg 243).

To start with, we may ask, why did she call herself by "Miriam Ali," assumingly after her father, even after her legal marriage, at the end of her autobiography, to Abdul? She was calling her self "Miss Ali" because she hated to be called Mrs. (Ali 135)! It becomes interesting to understand the autobiographer's real self .

Julia Swindells states that "autobiography is now often the mode that the people turn to when they want their voices to

be heard, when they speak for themselves, and sometimes for others" (7).

It becomes politically oriented and, hence, subjective. It all depends on memory, but memory is dictated by point-of-view from the moment they occur, all events, thoughts and perceptions exist only in memory.

They are therefore entirely dependent on the point-of-view of the present, perception existing as a dynamic rather than a fixed absolute. Thus even for the individual there is no fixed reality but rather a personal fiction, created and re-created according to the knowledge and concerns of the present... [which] all writing, whether employing experience or not, must be seen as subjective and fictional, created in the intellectual and emotional context of time in its new setting (Swindells 4).

So the present "Self" and its point-of-view influence the biographical content and its language. Miriam Ali depended on her memory over twenty seven years in various details.

She was even meticulous on tiny details or using images, for example, in her meeting with Ann Sufi in her early autobiography: "[m]y breath came in ragged gasps as I closed

my eyes and fought a losing battle with my emotions" (14), when Ann asked about Ahmed and Laila. She even described how "Ann prised the bread out of my arm.

It was squashed into an hourglass shape" (14).

Such details were used throughout the autobiography, which imply her fiction and style in rewriting the past .

Sidonie Smith emphasizes this point and the role of memory where it leaves only a trace of an earlier experience that we adjust its story; experience itself is mediated by the ways we describe and interpret it to others and to ourselves.... Even more fundamentally, the language we use to 'capture' memory and experience can never 'fix' the 'real' experience but only approximate it, yielding up its own surplus of meaning or revealing its own artificial closures (145) .

So, is biography fact or fiction? Ira Nadel states that: "No fact, we now understand, is without fiction. Biographers know this and it is their secret.

They understand that facts cannot tell all; that they are sometimes manipulated, altered or forgotten in the telling of a life" (25).

Has Miriam been selective in her narration? Why did she not look for her elder children in Yemen, Ahmed and Laila, as she did to Zana and Nadia? Or was she hiding something from the reader? She felt the same with Zana and Nadia: "I felt they were leaving things out, that there was a lot that they weren't telling us" (163). Has she done the same in her autobiography? In her meeting with Abdul Khada, she indicates that he says: "I'm an owner instead!"(124).

Were these his actual words? Did Miriam alter his words to serve her purpose? She used the same image of slavery in Abdul Khada's son's mouth, when he says: "It is true, you know, Muthana sold your daughters to Gowad and my Father, Abdul Khada. They paid thirteen hundred pounds each. I am so sorry" (150).

Nevertheless, Nadel stresses that this does not mean we should stop writing biographies or consider the methods of writing biography false. The critic "must identify and evaluate the presence of the biographer and understand what he contributes to making the life a work of art rather than failure." (Nadel 27).

Writing autobiographies is about the life and the experience the narrator, or author, suffers to bring the readers'

---

attention to. "As Sidonie Smith notes, all collaborative projects 'raise complex questions about who speaks in the text and whose story is being told, about who maintains control over the narrative and by implication over the purpose to which the story is put'" (Hart, Patricia 8). Could Miriam's story been altered or edited to serve her political quest to free her children? Jana Wain emphasized this political motive in the Epilogue to Miriam Ali's autobiography: "Miriam Ali embarked on a long trial of endurance that was to embarrass governments and hit the headlines worldwide" (1).

Interestingly enough, reading Nadia's interview with The Yemen Times we question the contradiction of "facts".

Nadia refuses the claims that she was oppressed and staying in Yemen by force, or suffer mental or physical pain (7 Feb. 2000).

What is missing or altered in their views? It is true that "self-narration was capable of reformulation in a variety of ways.

Parts of the narrative could be omitted, embellished, reframed and adopted for different audiences" (Kehily 24).

In one instance, Zana asked her mom to look for "a man in England, his name is Mohammed Abdul Karim... he is the one who did everything, he knows everything... about the marriage certificate, how it was made and everything" (Ali 186).

But Miriam did not say anything about him or any thing else to reveal this man's secret. So she only reveals what she thinks would help in her case and makes a selective process to recreate the past and form a structure that may help in her struggle !

In fact, "Critics of autobiography have long realized that at least two 'selves' are involved in the writing of a life: the self then, and the self now, doing the writing" (Cosslett 8). The "Self" in the past may not be the true self because the influence of the other "Self" in the present. Paul Eakin confirms this idea and says that "autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self creation, and, further, that self is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (3).

Memory reconstructs the past experience to fit the motives of the autobiographer's present. In other sense,



"autobiographical memory is imaginative as is future projection of the self. Both are based on past experience re-imagined (or re-constructed) to fit the present or future circumstances" (Nelson 130). Miriam Ali, the autobiographer, recollects her memory of the past experience and finds herself using her motives and circumstances to re-construct the story to fit her current present: "My imagination worked overtime, tormenting me with ideas about what was going on" (Ali 198).

She was writing to achieve her goals and be successful and effective.

She had to justify her fight for her cause in any way possible and then "the world could go to hell as far as [she] was concerned" (Ali 128).

Autobiography "is better understood as a ceaseless process of identity formation in which new versions of the past evolve to meet the constantly changing requirements of the self in each successive presence" (Eakin 36). Miriam is going through identity formation and her past experience goes through her present "Self". It could be a revelation of the present-self through revealing the incidents in the past.

Miriam's story is obviously true in its substance, but some details might have been imagined or guessed at, not necessarily every word or detail is true. It tells us more of the autobiographer at the time of composition and her "Self".

She must have been influenced by her present time and the conditions she was in. So the true self narrator could be ambiguous .

Since, as Edward W. Said argues, 'in any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation,' there can be no simple identification between the autobiographer and that 'I' that floats across the page of her text. The autobiographical text is, after all, a self-representational artifact, not the self itself (Smith 150).

#### Miriam as a Woman Writer and Cultural Identity

Being a woman writer has its effects too. "The woman who writes her life, autobiography exists as an alternative site of self-definition, an attempt to break patriarchal silences" (Swindells 32).

Miriam seems to try to create her own world with her own laws and conventions. She came from a superior culture to challenge a third-world culture and its law.

She was able to confront the men of hierarchy in that culture to the extent of insulting them and calling them "Arab bastards ."

We know that women are marginalized in patriarchal cultures so that they speak and write as outsiders, generating critiques of the dominant culture and its discourse. Simultaneously, as a result of their shared marginal status, women writers begin to create conventions and discourse of their own; a woman's culture that then counters and subverts the hegemonic aspiration of the patriarchy (Hileman 229-30).

Miriam was angry to submit to the Yemeni's law or try to understand it.

Zana, before leaving Yemen, faced her mother with the truth: "Mommy, calm down. You don't understand the Yemeni ways" (Ali 237). According to a Yemeni official "this is the Yemen, what the husband wants, the husband gets" (Ali 348). Miriam cannot accept this cultural reality.

Such cultural differences would not make Miriam happy. Although she followed her husband's patriarchal system, she would not accept this patriarchy in Yemen. In an interview with The Guardian, Nadia says: "They say I'm a slave. We keep the house and the kids and do the washing. It is no different from anyone. Why do they say I'm a slave? Any wife washes her husband's clothes" (Finn).

Nadia denies all allegations that she was abused by her in-laws or that she was not happy in Yemen. In the same interview she says; "It was never in my mind that I wanted to leave. It's just my sister (Zana), she wasn't comfortable" (Finn). Miriam doesn't want to believe that Nadia "wanted her privacy respected" (Ali 272).

Nadia seemed to understand Yamani cultural background and wished her mother to understand it too. Her private life was her own, and she made her own decision.

This contradicts what Miriam and Zana claim in their autobiographies because they were convinced that Nadia was not free or happy.

However, The Yemen Times made the interview with Nadia and took pictures of her and her family in a very

expensive home, which might be a result of the foreign pressure on the Yemeni government to enhance Nadia's life style .

Miriam makes judgments according to her cultural background.

She does not accept any other view, especially when it comes from a Yemeni.

Nadia told her to forget the past and solve the problem in different ways.

Nadia insists that she has to respect certain Yemeni rules and follow what her husband says (Ali 341-43).

Nadia faces her with a different concept that she became Muslim and learned the Islamic law (Ali 298).

This kind of obedience Miriam cannot understand, though she used to be obedient to Muthana before.

Nadia confronted her mother saying that she was free (Ali 383) and wanted to be left in peace with her family (386).

It is Nadia's decision to stay with her husband and children.

She could have left them behind, in one way or another like Zana, if she wanted, but she decided not to.

Nadia reached emotional maturity and was able to accommodate her life with her new situation, but Miriam sees that "nothing has changed for Nadia; she is still the fourteen-year-old girl who left, because her life has not changed" (298).

She didn't want to believe that Nadia was a grown up now and able to make her own decision .

In addition, racial and cultural attitudes are manifested by Miriam's hostility toward the Yemeni culture and system.

She seems to exhibit animosity and irritation towards the Yemenis, suspecting every move or person. "The autobiographical text is always telling a provisional truth, mediating between self-concept and cultural image using both as reference points from which to orient itself" (Kanner xxix).

Miriam's British cultural image was reflected in her narration. Her suffering and struggle with her nervous breakdowns require the reader to question her narration and her reliability.

The traumatized memory occasionally makes the narrator unreliable concerning personal history, but this very

unreliability is a part of her autobiographical present.... Memory is, however, the only means concerning the past and the present selves, to make sense of the present life in terms of the past. Yet memory is inherently unreliable, as the present self who revisits and retells the past events in a different self from the one who experienced them then (Massoura 11-12).

Miriam calls Nadia's husband by the name "Mohammed", but The Yemeni Times calls him "Samir"! Miriam calls Zana's father-in-law by the name "Abdul Khada", but the Yemeni Times calls him "Abdul Kadir"! What does such name differences reflect?! In another instance, that might seem trivial but is not, she claims that Faisal, a Yemeni official, was sitting in a car next to Nadia: " I watched Mohammed and Faisal take their seats, one each side of Nadia" (Ali 387-88)! It could not be accurate in a conservative society, because Faisal was not allowed, by the Islamic law, to sit so close to Nadia because he was a stranger and not a close relative.

She was even giving an implication that the tribe that her daughters lived with had a power that "even Allah does not venture to their land" (Ali 219). This sense of exaggeration and ignorance of Allah's power define her motive to gain

sympathy and support for her cause. Obviously Miriam was not accurate in her description and probably unaware of it.

Such cultural differences must have its effect on Miriam's knowledge and narration .

The other serious cultural difference is her living status with Muthana, from an Islamic cultural perspective. She claims that she was not married to him (Ali 229), nevertheless, she bore him seven children.

It is odd for a Muslim to live with a woman and bring children out of wedlock. Muthana may have not been a good Muslim, but he would rather send his children to be raised in his poor country than the free society in England.

Unfortunately, he was more interested in earning livings than paying attention to how to raise his children in a western culture.

It seems that Muthana realized his mistake and wanted his children to be raised within his own culture and religion.

He did not teach them how to be good Muslims because he was not.



He said that he did not want his daughters to date or become prostitutes: "I did not want them to grow up in Birmingham where they would marry a black or they would become prostitutes, like their mother" (Ali 193-94).

He confirms his fear of such mistakes: "In Yemen, they are good. They are Muslim.

No one does any thing bad to them" (Ali 194), especially when Nadia was caught up shoplifting. He certified his daughters' marriage with witnesses and a dowry, according to the Islamic laws. Miriam could not understand this simple Islamic procedure of marriage.

He made his decision to marry them off as a way to make up for his shortfalls in raising them according to the Islamic law.

Ironically, Miriam thought that a Yemeni woman was coming to Birmingham to take Ashia, one of Miriam's daughters, to be a prostitute: "Mom got this letter saying that a woman was coming to take Ashia and bring her here as a prostitute, then they were going to get Tina and me" (Ali 165).

Miriam's fear for her children made her imagine things.

Obviously Muthana would not do that to his daughters, but things did not go as he wished for; his daughter Aisha, for example, had a boyfriend, and probably Muthana was not happy for the way they were brought up in the Birmingham society.

Obviously Miriam could not understand Muthana's culture and his reasons for sending his children to Yemen because he was contradicting himself.

Muthana and Abdul Khada (Kadir) preferred to live in England than in Yemen.

Muthana lived all his life with Miriam without practicing his Islamic duties. In fact, she realized the real differences between him and other Yemenis, such as Ann Sufi's husband (Ali 23), and Colonel Abdul Walli (Ali 219), for example.

But she was unable to cope with such cultural differences.

She could not bear seeing her children away in a place like "hell": "Would anyone in their right mind really want to choose this place in preference to any corner of England when he or she knew the difference?" (Ali 367).

Her subjective judgments define her unreliable narration.

She depended on her cultural background which would not tolerate living in such environment or obey such patriarchal system .

Consequently we should identify the "self" narrating the biography and

try to identify the particular self that the writer wishes us to see. At the same time we should delve beneath that surface and ask whether we can detect such tendencies as self-dramatizing, self-pitying, self-glorifying, excessive modesty, or self-defensive rationalizing. We should try to define the basic tone of the autobiography ( Fowler xxiii-xxiv ).

Her psychological and physical pains throughout her trauma indicate her self –dramatizing pain, and eagerness for sympathy and support.

In certain situations she was semiconscious, emotionally uncontrolled, quickly tempered, weak, and inattentive and short in cultural understanding. She fought for her children and assured their freedom by all means possible.

Her autobiography was one way to retain her children and bring peace to her life. And the long years of struggle must have given Miriam time to reconstruct her biography and write it in a way to suit her motives .

The act of reflection may bring new understanding of one's self, and the hard thinking about one's experience that is a necessary part of autobiography is likely to produce new insights as to what one's self is.

If a writer should carry on this process of self-examination longer, or more intensely, or at a different time, or under different circumstances, the perception and presentation of the self might well be affected (Fowler xxiii) .

In fact, Miriam's life with Muthana started around 1961 and her autobiography appeared in 1995. Miriam changed by the influence of time, the ghostwriter and the political situations she has gone through.

She must have been shaped by the circumstances she faced in Yemen and the influence of the media around her.

With her new self she was trying to rebel against the patriarchal system she had to face and her motherly emotions to free her daughters. "Readers must therefore be alert to a

wide variety of influences that may have shaped a writer's perspectives and judgments" (Fowler xv).

These influences may vary from her relationships with her parents, her choice of her "husband" or partner, her education, her social background, her culture, and racial differences. Obviously Miriam was aiming at the European media to help her and to gain sympathy and support.

She wrote her autobiography with all these influences and circumstances in her mind. Miriam Ali, assisted by Jana Wain, knew how to make her autobiography a success .

#### Conclusion :

In conclusion, Miriam has gone through several changes in her life, as a character in her autobiography.

She started as a naive romantic young woman who was taken by Muthana's exotic background and culture.

After giving birth to seven children, she began to realize her reality, where she was completely dependent on her husband and unable to voice herself on the future of her children.

Miriam, the character, lived a typical role of a wife and mother, but she was not treated the way she wanted to be ideally treated. She realized, very late, that Muthana was not the "knight" she was waiting for. Her agony in seeing her children, taken away from her, sparked a desire for independence. She realized that she had to stand up for herself and for her children.

Miriam Ali succeeded in saving herself from her lack of confidence and an unwanted relationship.

She suffered a lot to find her identity and be independent.

But this autobiography does not have to be an exact picture of her past, because the present "Self" in narrating her story must have altered some parts of her life.

Miriam Ali, the autobiographer, must have been influenced by her "superior" cultural background, the long experience, the media, the stereotypes of the Arabs, the ghostwriter or co-author, time and the present situations.

Her ultimate goal in writing was to take her story to the public to put pressure on the officials to bring her children back.

She was able to bring three of her children back, but Nadia decided to stay in Yemen. Miriam Ali found herself late, and did her best to help her children start a new life. But *Without Mercy: A Woman's Struggle Against Modern Slavery* tells a subjective view of a personal story shaped by the present "Self" and the influence of different aspects of her life .

Works Cited :

- 1-"The Mystery Unveiled." Editorial. Yemen Times 1 Jan. 2000.
- 2-"The Mystery Unveiled." Editorial. Yemen Times 7 Feb. 2000.
- 3-Alborg, Concha. "A Never-Ending Autobiography: The Fiction of Carmen Martin Gaité." Gender and Genre in

Literature: Redefining Autobiography in twentieth-Century Women's Fiction. Eds. Janice Morgan and Colette T. Hall. New York: Garland, 1991. 243-260.

4-Ali, Miriam, and Jana Wain. Without Mercy: A Mother's Struggle against Modern Slavery. London: Time Warner, 1995.

5-Al-Saqqaf, Walid Abdulaziz. "Nadia Muhsin: A Victim of Greed." Yemen Times 14 Feb. 2000 .

6-Benkering, Ellettha J. E. Schoustra-van. "Life Stories and Cross-Cultural Marriages: A Discussion of Betty de Hart, 'Not without My Daughter: On Parental Abduction, Orientalism and Maternal Melodrama.'" European Journal of Women's Studies 9 (2002): 69-78.

7-Cosslett, Tess, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield. Introduction. Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods. Ed. Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield. New York: Routledge, 2000: 1-18 .

8-Eakin, Paul John. Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1985 .

9-Finn, Melanie. "Nadia's Choice." Guardian 1 Apr. 2002.



10-Fowler, Lois J., and David H. Fowler. Introduction. Revelations of Self: American Women in Autobiography. By Fowler. Ed. New York: State University of N.Y. Press, 1990: xi-xxiv

11-Hart, Betty de. "Not Without My Daughter: ON Parental Abduction, Orientalism and Maternal Melodrama." European Journal of Women's Studies 8 (2001): 51-65.

12-Hart, Patricia. "Writing the Self." Women Writing Women: The Frontiers Reader. Eds. Patricia Hart, Karen Weathermon, and Susan H. Armitage. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.

13-Hileman, Sharon, and Ann K. Johnson. "The Kaleidoscopic Vision: Autobiographical Inscription in the Works of Tatyana Mamonova." Gender and Genre in Literature: Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction. Ed. Janice Morgan and Colette T. Hall. New York: Garland, 1991. 229-242.

14-Kanner, Barbara Penny. Introduction. Women in Context: Two Hundred Years of British Women Autobiographers: A Reference Guide and Reader. By Kanner and others. New York: G. K. Hall & co, 1997 .

15-Kehily, Mary Jane. "Self-Narration, Autobiography and Identity Construction." *Gender and Education* 7 (1995): 23-31.

16-Maclean, Marie. *The Name of the Mother Writing Illegitimacy*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

17-Maroula, Joannou. "She who would be politically free herself must strike the blow: suffragette autobiography and suffragette militancy." *The Uses of Autobiography*. Ed. Julia Swindells. London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1995. 31-44.

18-Massoura, Kiriaki, and Mark W. J. Garner. "A Language in Everything you do: The Reflective Self in Autobiographical Narrative." *Journal of Language and Literature* 4 (2005): 1-19.

19-Muhsen, Zana, and Andrew Crofts. *A Promise to Nadia*. Great Britain: Time Warner, 2000.

20-Muhsen, Zana, and Andrew Crofts. *Sold: One Woman's True Account of Modern Slavery*. Great Britain: Time Warner, 1991.

21-Nadel, Ira B. "The Biographer's Secret." *Studies in Autobiography*. Ed. James Olney. New York: Oxford UP Press, 1988. 24-31.

22-Nelson, Katherine. "Self and Social Functions: Individual Autobiographical Memory and Collective Narrative." *Memory* 11 (2003): 125-36.

23-Smith, Sidonie. "Constructing Truth in Lying Mouths: Truth Telling in Women's Autobiography." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 23 (1990): 145-63 .

24-Stuart, Julia. "I hate my dad for what he's done to us." *Independent* 17 Jan. 2000.

25-Swindells, Julia. Introduction. *The Uses of Autobiography*. By Swindells. London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1995. 1-12.

26-Unsworth, Jane. "Why does an author who apparently draws so much on autobiography seem committed to 'alienating' the reader? A reflection on theories of autobiography with reference to the work Janet Frame." *The Uses of Autobiography*. Ed. Julia Swindells. London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1995. 24-30.

27-Ware, Vron. "Moments of Danger: Race, Gender, and Memories of Empire." *History and Theory* 31.4 (1992): 116-37.

28-Watson, Martha. *Lives of Their Own: A Rhetorical Dimension in Autobiographies of Women Activists*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1999.