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**Writing the Not-Self: Stories That Live Within**

In 1979, my 14-year-old mother left her home in Baghdad, Iraq. She left her dolls, childhood pictures, clothes, school friends, neighbours, certificates, and the short Jasmin tree she loved so much in the backyard garden where the swing her dad made. She never returned. To my mom, “home” became just a word.

My mother still remembers the night her family escaped Iraq. In the borders between Iraq and Jordan, they told the soldiers that they were going to a cousin’s wedding in Amman, and that they will be back by next morning. There faces had to lie too. They had to look happy. Believing their fake relative’s lie. Pretending that tomorrow morning isn’t more than thirty years ahead.

Darkness and fear are all she can recall. For her, the morning they all waited for never came. She experienced loss of home, security and identity very early and had to live with it for the rest of her life. Watching her little brother wet his pants in the car that night, watching her father have to lie and her mother shivering helplessly, she lost the innocence of the child and teenager she was. Lost trust in the world. Something in our family’s image cracked forever. My grandparents, aunts, and uncles became refugees. Citizens of the world.

Thirty-four years later, I wrote my first novel, *The Window that Saw,* which was inspired by my mom’s story. My novel discusses the meaning of citizenship, homeland, identity, and ideology through the perspective of a woman named Zainab and three generations of her descendants. Originally from Turkey, Zainab abandons her disabled husband and escapes to Iraq in the 1940’s. In the wake of her escape, her grandchildren experience the eight-year Iran/Iraq war, her great-grandchildren suffer the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and finally her great-great grandchildren escape to Canada as refugees.

When writing, there are no *others.* None of the characters you bring to life, nor the incidents you create, are far from your innermost soul—one can’t simply write outside of one’s inner self. It’s the writer’s pain, suffering, and yearning that gives birth to a good manuscript. To quote Haruki Murakami’s novel *Kafka on the Shore,* “It’s like Tolstoy said. Happiness is an allegory, unhappiness a story.” The following are examples of writings that came from authors’ pain and agony as part of their personal trauma and experience, which I would like to share with you.

When the Chilean writer Isabel Allende’s grandfather passed away, she was unable to be by his side. Back then, she was in Venezuela, politically exiled for thirteen years from Chile, her home country. Because she could not be with him, Allende wrote letters to her grandfather that later became her famous novel *The House of the Spirits*. Later, her daughter Paula got sick and died. Isabel wrote about this devastating time of her life in a novel called *Paula*, which went on to become a best-seller and a hit. Hundreds of thousands of people who suffered the loss of loved ones, found great relief in reading *Paula.*

In *Black Milk*, the Turkish writer Elif Shafak wrote about her personal experience with fearing marriage, meeting her husband, and post-partum depression. “I know why the caged bird sings” by Maya Angelou, is another example of a great work that emerged from female trauma.

There is a huge difference between writing fiction and a biography. In the latter, there are mere facts. Biography is a life as seen by its writer’s eye, without tricks and special techniques, whereas imagination plays a more central role in writing fiction. Some writers have a hard time separating between their daily journals and fiction work, such as Anais Nin, who used to write for psychological therapy and confused her biography with a first novel. However, no writer can write a great fiction without living it.

In June 2014, I was watching the news and got shocked by the footage of ISIS members destroying Iraqi artefacts. History going back to ten thousand years was being erased within seconds, erased forever. Lamassu, the human-headed bull—sometimes lion—with two huge wings, a protective deity that dated back to the Assyrian era ten thousand years ago, got destroyed. Jonah’s Shrine which has special religious and historical importance in Mosul City (where the population is an uncommon near-equal mix of Muslims and Christians), was bombed.

I got depressed. I couldn’t eat or sleep for weeks after. Finally, I decided to write a novel about the destruction inflicted by ISIS. I decided to write a novel about it because I realized that only events that are made into stories get immortalized, and that in one way or another, no matter what we write about, we always write ourselves. Every word I wrote lived in my heart and soul for some time before it was written. Somehow, those very words will live forever and are much harder to destroy.