

## Jean Said Makdisi Oral History Content Summary

### Track 1 [36:40] [Session One: 28 June 2018]

Jean Said Makdisi [JSM]. Describes happy childhood, closeness to brother, Edward Said [ES]. Father born in Jerusalem, Palestine. Grandmother born in Lebanon when part of Ottoman Empire. Describes Ottoman conscription of boys and subsequent wave of migrants early 20<sup>th</sup> century, father going to United States of America (USA) aged 14, citizenship and being drafted into US Army. Describes father's dream to become a lawyer, attributing overall sense of justice while growing up, to father. Mentions father serving in French Foreign Legion. Father's return to USA and plan to study Law interrupted by letter from his dying mother calling for return home and subsequent promise to stay in Jerusalem to care for family. Describes father's regret and JSM haunted by idea of 'selfish mother' mentioning her three sons. [04:40] Discusses 'strain' around issues of who belongs to whom and who does what for whom in a family with example of own mother's behaviour, acknowledges father's feminism in scenario. Mentions mother giving birth to six children, one dying. Mentions family living in Cairo, Egypt, during Palestine War. Describes father as bachelor joining cousin in successful business venture, Palestine Educational Company, selling books and records, expanding to Haifa and Yaffa, moving to Cairo to set up partnership there, returning to Palestine for annual celebrations. Describes growing up in Cairo with background of Palestine, not fully grasping situation, observing stress of family members arriving when JSM aged 8. Mentions that ES and JSM born in Jerusalem and sisters born in Cairo, all obtaining American passports because father veteran. [09:34] Mother born in Nazareth, Palestine, of Greek Orthodox origin as most Christians of the region at time. Describes maternal grandfather from Saffa, Palestine, working in Jerusalem and later going to Texas, USA, becoming a Baptist minister. Mentions grandmother's father first Arab pastor, of Protestant church near *Serail*, Government Palace. Anecdote from time. Confirms religion as significant aspect of childhood. Mentions mother only girl in family, with four brothers. Describes father's passion for modernism, first to buy car, sewing machine, refrigerator. Detail of first ice boxes before refrigerators. [14:45] Describes awareness of a breach with the past as Protestant family, linking to feminist issues raised, personal conflict with commonly perceived separation of tradition and modernity, JSM viewing as false dichotomy. Gives example of grandmother's life, a young widow with five children given work because husband had been pastor. Mentions Palestinian Revolt 1936-1939. Anecdote about family going from Nazareth to port for arrival of church organ. Mentions family's involvement with the American mission, and mission's link with American University of Beirut (AUB), grandfather's post in Homs (now Syria). Describes music as large part of family life, missionaries teaching hymns, sung in the shower, and father's love of classical music played on 33<sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> vinyl records. [18:33] Describes religious aspect of childhood as 'joyful' but being 'dragged to church' no matter what. Describes churches attended as family, all baptized in Anglican Church, Jerusalem, Palestine, mentioning All Saints Cathedral, Cairo, Egypt, British control of Suez Canal. Mentions enjoyment of singing. Describes family holiday traditions and focus on food, hatred of preparations involved for special Easter cake. [22:35] Describes family courtship stories of grandparents. Story of great-grandmother as tyrannical mother-in-law, but famous horsewoman riding bareback and racing against men and spending time in coarse male company, raising question of the meaning of the traditional woman and the modern woman.

[29:45] States that there can be no understanding of feminism without an understanding of class, relating to own privileged life. Talks about non-acknowledgement of Arab history in curriculum of English school attended, JSM's fluent knowledge of English History as a young girl, and none of her own. Describes complete change after nationalization of Suez Canal in 1956 and ensuing Tripartite aggression from Israel, United Kingdom, France, bombing of Cairo and suspension of school. Discusses father's 'feminism' at the time with insistence that JSM find work, to have skill in life, his ethic after losing everything in Jerusalem, his employment of several Palestinian girls. Anecdote relating to tetanus. Describes hatred for typing lessons, enjoyment of sewing, darning with wooden egg. Makes distinction between the idea of independence and actual independence. Resentment of brother for having own room, JSM sharing bedroom with her grandmother and four sisters, describing lack of privacy. [pause]

## **Track 2 [30:29] [Session continued]**

Describes being 'seeped in British stuff' with school uniform, striking JSM as 'benign' until Suez, remarking on impact on her, as 1952 Egyptian Revolution. Discusses decolonization of Egypt, imperialism regarding Palestine, and 'personal grudge' that Lebanon as yet not decolonized, citing streets in Beirut still named after French colonialists, Allenby, Clémenceau, Picot. Recalls first days of Revolution, Gamal Abdel Nasser abolishing use of titles, reflecting on it as influential moment. Mentions book written, *Beirut Fragments* and story about continued attendance of church in midst of Suez War and irony of sermon against Egyptians, witnessed in Scottish church, as being bombed by the British. [5:30] Gives example of grandmother as illustrative of the injustice of women's roles. Attributes own activism to 'powerful' brother. Mentions nickname given by ES, and memoir JSM now writing of him. Describes ES' sense of humour and literary sophistication. Anecdote about piano playing and sibling relationship. [10:25] Describes parents' marriage and roles. Anecdote about ES misbehaviour. Discusses observations on the invisibility of women in historical record, leading on to book written, 'Teta, My Mother and Me' and JSM's original chosen title 'Inside Women' reflecting layers, rejected by publisher. [15:11] Describes home in Beirut being bombed twice and understanding the value of life through the loss of others around her. Describes passports and nationalities within family and legal complications. Anecdote about mother's identity. Explains absence of sexual element in book. [20:15] Discusses class as main contributory factor to situation of women, persecutory laws in all religions, Jewish as the worst, with examples of Israeli woman. Discusses demands of middle class women in the 1960s, for work and using own name, women in Muslim world keeping own name, JSM unusual in use of both. Describes modernisation as equal to colonialism in context of country. Story about uncle and family tree. [26:30] Discusses meaning of culture as distinct from common usage relating to the Arts, instead relating to cultural experience of being subjects of different rule, one minute of the Ottoman Sultan, British or French the next. Describes World War I as transformative in country's history, colonialism paving the way in spite of common perception that 'just happened'. Describes attendance of family members to Italian, Russian, Christian and Jewish missionary schools, mentioning large Jewish community in Beirut, growth of Muslim schools in response, attributing this to division in country. Comment about Iranian schools now in Beirut, comparing to

British, Italian and Russian activities, JSM describing own views as “cross-current” defying “ clichés”.

### **Track 3 [20:24] [Session continued]**

Discusses class in terms of feminism and women’s lives, female leaders taking on ‘tyrannical’ male characteristics, comments that feminism is about power. Refers to Seymour Hersh interview on The Intercept. Describes Indira Ghandi, Benazir Bhutto, Hillary Clinton as “monsters”. Describes men ignoring women as greatest male weapon with anecdote about attending events with husband. [05:18] Describes Iranian women in positions of power, and misleading appearance in Islamic dress. Story about female engineer head of university in Iran, introduction of Family Studies. Mentions grandmother’s school founded by Elizabeth Bowen Thompson, now Hariri High School. Discusses women’s absence from politics, women’s involvement always separated from men’s and therefore disconnected from reality. [10:05] Describes Women’s Tribunal with judges Asma Khader, Laure Meghaizel as greatest feminist event ever attended. Stories heard, from Egypt and Mauritania, JSM’s shock on learning about fat camps for premature marriage, describing detail. Views stories as symbols of women’s suffering. [15:31] Considers claim of war being harder for women and lack of attention to similar cases against men, giving example of male rape as method of torture in Balkan war. Discusses idea that knowledge of history is good preparation for the future. Comments on lives of soldiers as mother of three sons, wondering why women choose to join armies.

### **Track 4 [06:26] [Session continued]**

Reflects on current state of the world and Middle East with Western intervention, mentioning Al Qa’eda and Daesh, Palestine, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, transformation from Christian v Muslim to Sunni v Shi’ite. Observes that average person disconnected and uninformed about core issues. Discusses need for focus on small detail and analysis of perceptions, stating that colonial issues have accidentally attached to feminist issues. Example of intellectual sleeping on floor. Mentions US Government policy with children at Mexican border. [05:00] Discusses change in role of women in Lebanon, relating to economics and class, and young girls working after marriage. Expresses disdain for capitalist society. [interrupted]

### **Track 5 [27:45] [Session continued]**

Describes division of household work growing up, brother never helping, JSM and sisters forced to help, with corporal punishment or withholding of meal if didn’t. Describes anger at having to darn ES’ socks, washing windows in Dhour el Shweire, Lebanon. Story about hunting, ES shooting and JSM carrying dead birds, viewing as symbolic of women having to clean up mess men make in financial and all aspects of life. Remarks on dislike of women v men narrative. Mentions ES’ hatred for it later in life. Discusses view of society today in terms of male and female roles, observing feminist sons and the daughter-in-laws, remarking that rules of marriage have changed, sons not viewing housework as responsibility of wives. Reflects that super-wealthy women not on the whole feminists. Describes own experience of concurrent movements in 1960s’ America, deliberately stopped, commenting that women’s

movement and environment movement most revolutionary because turn everything upside down. [05:30] Removal of roles in middle class with example from son's marriage. Describes life in Washington DC and Virginia, USA with wives having to learn to deal with accounts and taxes during wartime, and conflict on return of men no longer reliant on. Describes meeting husband through family connection. Describes own household, sons helping with household chores, noting previous historic professional relationship between woman and housework among middle class, and that everything once again class-related, not indicative of women in Beqaa, Lebanon or agricultural regions. [09:18] Discusses wedding dresses, describing that historically non-existent, women wearing nicest dress owned, white bridal gowns coming from 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and Queen Victoria, dominant Muslim community in Nazareth taking on black funeral wear from minority Christian practice acquired from missionaries. Mentions son's wedding in Bangladesh, bride traditionally wearing red, white denoting mourning. "As you travel more, you become less sure about your way being the right way." Discusses relevance of marriage today, seeing inequality as built in to it, for men too. Describes attendance at thousands of conferences for women, considers "preaching to the choir". Suggestions for ways of involving and integrating men with example of transformative effect. [14:40] Discusses how women not allowed to be head of the family, when can't open bank account for child with example of daughter-in-law, government excuses regarding legacy of Ottoman laws, including nationality laws left from British and French. Refers to school history book chapter on "The Sick Man of Europe". Describes Lebanon's personal status laws based on 18 sects. Gives background of adultery law from French rule, based on law to curb French women from associating with German soldiers in Second World War. Describes own reaction to motherhood, feeling alien and attempts to reject. [19:35] Talks about conversations with ES that JSM has written. Story about attacking with walnuts in shells as children. Describes ES' sense of justice, attributing to influence of religion though not a religious man, his empathy for others and feminist perspective. [25:00] Reiterates point about involving men more before change can happen. Mentions Hillary Clinton, Benazir Bhutto, Theresa May, Margaret Thatcher. Dislike of tokenism. Discusses main obstacles as too much reliance on clichés, differing concept of rights.

#### **Track 6 [07:57] [Session continued]**

Gives experience as Palestinian, escalation of brutality and Israeli language. Mentions limited coverage by foreign media. Mentions The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Describes being a writer as her weapon. Mentions ES' non-violent stance. Describes relationship with Israelis. Discusses example of Japanese comfort women and Nuremberg trials, astounded by Israeli disconnectedness from own history and eventual accountability. Refers to US policy of separating Mexican babies from their mothers. Observes that women think more emotionally and less strategically, discussing difficulty of women fitting in. Mentions political work of Lebanese and Palestinian artists, not making difference to Israelis.