

Fabiola Popa

Polytechnic University of Bucharest

**“THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD AND ...MINE”:  
PRIVATE AND COLLECTIVE HISTORY IN PENELOPE LIVELY’S  
MEMOIRS**

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**Abstract:** *The paper focuses on the two memoirs written by the British writer Penelope Lively, *Oleander Jacaranda* and *A House Unlocked*, with the purpose of exposing the ambivalent nature of her writings, explicable through the challenging experience of growing up British in an Oriental world. It will examine issues such as: the (re)construction of the self through memories and memoir writing, the self shaped by personal/ collective past, memoir writing as a way of relating the self to the cultural and historical context of provenance.*

Writing a memoir must be a truly challenging endeavor; not only does it require the strength and the courage to recall places, events and people long gone, but it also raises the crucial issue of choice: where should I begin from? What part of the complex, multiple, ever-changing person that I have been should I submit, firstly to my own close examination and secondly to the examination of my readership? How do I know that by choosing to narrate this episode rather than that one I don’t obstruct a source of the self that could provide a more complete image about who I truly am? On the other hand, must/ should I tell them everything about me?

Penelope Lively’s case is quite interesting in as much as the choices she makes in her two memoirs are quintessential references for a better understanding of two major issues to be found throughout the entirety of her body of work, namely: on the one hand, the one related to the self shaped by the personal experience of growing up British in an Oriental world; on the other hand, the one related to the self shaped by the larger historical context in which one lives and which one cannot escape. Thus, well aware of the impossibility to capture the entire complexity of a human existence, she chooses to stick to what she believes to be the core of her life experience, and to be consistent with herself by exploring the two topics mentioned above from an autobiographical point of view.

In the introduction to her book *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women*, Helen M. Buss discusses the place that memoir writing occupies in the history of what is currently called “life writing”. She gives an overview of the history of the term, she comments on the reasons of its popularity, on its relationship with other types of writing and highlights many other issues to be taken in consideration when identifying the current status of memoirs. For the purpose of this article, I have chosen to emphasize only the idea according to which there is a strong need in human beings “to make a connection between their lives and their culture, especially when culture fails to represent their perceived identities” (Buss 3). Therefore, according to Buss, memoir writing

... is becoming a discursive practice in which material realities and imaginary possibilities co-exist. It can accommodate both the factual and the theoretical and it may concern itself with the life of a community as with that of an individual. [...]It bridges the typical strategies of historical and literary discourses in order to establish the necessary connections between the private and the public, the personal and the political.[...]The memoir is increasingly used to interrogate the private individual’s relationship to a history/or a culture from which she finds her experience of herself and her life excluded (Buss 2).

With Lively, the idea of an individual being the sum of all the historical events he/she witnessed and even of the whole history of the world is a major concern; it appears in many of her novels, in some

more obviously than in others. The most pertinent example is *Moon Tiger*, her most acclaimed book, winner of Booker Prize. In it, dying historian and journalist Claudia Hampton confesses her wish to leave behind her one last piece of her mind: a history of the world and of herself.

A history of the world, yes. And in the process, my own. The Life and Times of Claudia H. The bit of the twentieth century to which I've been shackled, willy-nilly, like it or not. Let me contemplate myself within my context: everything and nothing. The history of the world as selected by Claudia: fact and fiction, myth and evidence, images and documents (MT1).

It is precisely what Lively does in her two memoirs, following in the steps of her character: a selection of some of the most representative episodes of her life, which do not leave out the larger historical and cultural context they were lived in. Thus, Lively's writing reflects the characteristics of the typical contemporary memoir as summarized by Buss and differentiates itself from autobiography:

Memoir, unlike traditional autobiography, is often specifically occasional, concentrating on a small but significant period of time. The "narrowing of lens", "the focus" on the significant event, helps create the dramatic nature of memoir with its scenic quality, which de-emphasizes linear narratives that are necessary to telling a whole life. Its concentration on scenes of trauma, initiation and radical changes in consciousness are performed through writing, which makes real what the larger culture may not as yet recognize. Set in vivid, scenic recreations of lived experience, the memoir wishes to register as history formerly untold, but must use the devices of drama and fiction to create new realities (Buss 23).

Although the two books feature the same person, that is young Penelope, they are quite different in terms of style and structure. Let us look into the first memoir, written in 1994. *Oleander Jacaranda* is "a book about childhood. It is also a discussion of the nature of childhood perception and a view of Egypt in the 1930s and 1940s" (OJ vii). It presents the childhood of the British privileged girl who witnessed the Second World War while she was living under the protection of British Diaspora in Cairo. The author hesitates between the use of present and past tense, as she tries to combine a child's involuntary registration of things happening around and the meaning attached to them by adulthood hindsight. As we read this memoir, we realize Lively is less interested in building some clear chronology than in tracing associative patterns of sensory and emotional recall. Thus, she goes through the "brilliant frozen moments" (OJ vii) that make up the memories of the years lived in Egypt: trips with her nanny Lucy to the Cairo zoo, a visit from a snake charmer whose job was to chase away the snakes of the house, seaside holidays at Alexandria, a trip down the Nile - an idyllic existence that ended abruptly when little Penelope's parents divorced and she was sent back to England at a boarding school.

The writer allows us to enter the child's mind exactly the moment the latter realizes she can revisit the past and that the time which passes by carrying her to the future is not lost forever; on the contrary, it is possible to repeat that past through remembrance:

We are going by car from Bulaq Dakhrur to Heliopolis. I am in the back. The leather of the seat sticks to my bare legs. We travel along a road lined at either side with oleander jacaranda trees, alternate splashes of white and blue. I chant quietly: 'Jacaranda...oleander...jacaranda...oleander...' and as I do so there comes to me the revelation that in a few hours' time we shall return by the same route and that I shall pass the same trees in reverse order-oleander, jacaranda- and that, by the same token, I can look back upon myself of now, of this moment. I shall be able to think about myself now, thinking this-but it will be then, not now.

And in due course I did so, and perceived with excitement the chasm between past and future, the perpetual slide of the present. As, writing this, I think with equal wonder of that ir retrievable child, and one of the eerie relationship between her mind and mine. She is myself, but a self which is unreachable except by means of such miraculously surviving moments of being: the alien within (OJ 1).

The confessed purpose of the memoir is to use the writing process as a vehicle for reflecting on the way in which children perceive things around them, on how much of childhood an adult remembers

and to what extent these memories are reliable, to understand how the past events shaped the present self. Constant considerations on memory/past/selfhood are made from the preface. As the reader turns the last page, s/he realizes that the interest for certain topics that are to be found in Penelope Lively's books (child-parent relationships, the heterogeneous and unreliable nature of truth, alterity, the self shaped by personal and collective history) was triggered precisely by some of her childhood experiences.

In this paper I will comment only on one of them, which I consider to be the most powerful of all, that of "growing up British, in Egypt...in accordance with the teachings of one culture, but surrounded by all the signals of the other (*OJ 12*)". The people who imposed the proper attitude one was supposed to adopt toward natives were young Penelope's parents, the society they would frequent, but above all her very British nanny, for whom "To be English was to be among the chosen and the saved; to be other was simply to be other." (*OJ 17*) She taught young Penelope that the natives were dirty, barbarian and ill-bred, that the whole land was rather unfriendly with foreigners, while England was an idyllic, brave world to dream about and long for. On the atlas she used to teach geography to the child England and its protectorates were pink. The book that she used to teach history featured "glossy romantic pictures of national history, with potted accounts of the finer moments of the nation's rise to pink glory." (*OJ 19*) Amused adult Penelope examines with ironic indulgency the nanny's strife to keep the child tuned to the spirit of her native land, but from time to time the worry that the reminiscences of such an education will always stay with her shows: "I look back in dismay. There has been a lot of unlearning to do. And can it all be unlearned? Is there perhaps deep within me some unreconstructed layer which believes pink is best and that it has been uphill all the way from brave Bodicea to good Lord Kitchener?" (*OJ 19*) What proves to be more powerful than this influence is the immediate contact with the natives, with the beauty of the Egyptian landscape, the feeling that Egypt was home, because it was there and then, warm and alive. What also probably mattered is the fact that the girl felt more comfortable in the company of the natives than in that of her own disinterested, cold parents; the episode in which she is finally allowed to enter a native's hut is decisive for the understanding of the biased views imposed on her. It is this very experience that shatters the child's misconception about the natives surrounding her:

I find the episode intriguing because I can recover my own feelings of bewilderment and disorientation and because I can now see objectively that it seems to be an instance of a child becoming aware of the existence of other view-points-an erosion of the egocentric vision of childhood. And the whole thing is complicated by the further dimension of cultural assumption. I saw that peasant family with a new clarity, both stepping aside from my own customary point of view and shedding for an instant the obscuring wisdoms of the adults I knew: Lucy, my parents, their friends. I saw that there is more than one way of looking at the world, and was startled (*OJ 15*).

This awareness will be capitalized on throughout the entire body of work written by Lively and in "technical" writing terms it is translated through what she has called "the conflicting evidence", namely the presentation of one and the same event from the different perspectives of all the participants involved. Lively openly confesses to her reader the ambivalence of her position as an outsider from within, an ambivalence born from the clash between the British biased view and the Oriental day-to-day reality; thus, through her writing, she questions the binary constructions so cherished by both post-colonial criticism and the imperialist discourse. By assuming a liminal position on the cultural and geographical map of the world, the writer draws attention to the necessity to reconsider British colonial literature and history, to do way with mere oppositions and to proceed to careful examination of the complexity of the cultural spaces inhabited by the oppressed and the oppressors.

In its turn, *A House Unlocked* is a line of thought transposed into a palpable, visible form and it underlines one of Lively's major concerns: the way in which private and collective history intertwine and contribute to the formation of the self. The book begins with the author's belief about what a writer's mission should be:

It has always seemed to me that one effective way of writing fiction is to take the immediate and the particular and to give it a universal resonance-so to manipulate and expand personal experience that it

becomes relevant to others. This book is an attempt to do the same thing not with a human life but with the span of one's family occupation of a house [...] I thought that I would see if the private life of a house could be made to bear witness to the public trauma of a century.

Thus, while the book is partly a memoir in as much as it features Lively's relatives and Lively herself (even if rather sporadically), it is also social history, as it goes through some of the most important historic events of the period of time covered in the book: the Russian revolution, the Holocaust, the Blitz.

The protagonist of the book is Golsoncott, the large Edwardian country house in west Somerset that was occupied by her grandmother and then her aunt from 1923 to 1995. The major influence of *A House Unlocked* is acknowledged to be Frances Yates's book *The Art of Memory*, a book that presents a medieval memorizing technique in which objects in the rooms of an imaginary mansion are used as a mnemonic. Thus a series of inanimate things - a sampler, a gong stand, a silver dish, a photo - act as prompts for recollection. The book turns out to be not Lively's autobiography, although her presence is reminded of here and there, but rather a series of short biographies of some people who came to inhabit the house forced by circumstances: a Russian woman and her children who fled the Bolsheviks in the 1920s; a Viennese boy who fled the Nazis in 1939, six children, billeted at Golsoncott during the London Blitz, helped out by Lively's aunt, Rachel Reckitt, an artist and a feminist, the most vivid character of the book. It also puts forth a series of comments on various social topics pertaining to the historical time span covered: great social mobility; the advance of the railway; the drastically declining role of the Church in English life; a drastic change in the perspective on family life; the unprecedented familiarization of city dwellers with the country and the other way around etc. Rather than dealing with the changes in the life or consciousness of one particular individual, *A House Unlocked* turns out to be a social history guide to what's changed in England and what hasn't, clearly defining its culture and society.

As mentioned before, the book puts forth the idea of the self being hugely influenced by the historical circumstances one lives in, an idea underlying Lively's *Moon Tiger* as well; here, Claudia states her intention to write a history of the world and of her own, "the whole triumphant murderous unstoppable chute-from the mud to the stars, universal and particular, your story and mine" (MT 1). The book ends in the same tone: "Unless I am a part of everything, I am nothing" (MT 207).

*A House Unlocked* can be said to be such a book, in as much as it does precisely that, it places the author in the larger context of historical circumstances she and her relatives had to live in. By reading the book, one can understand better what shaped the author's interest for certain topics or what models she had for her characters. For example, I believe that her aunt Rachel, a maverick and a self-made woman, an unusual female figure for her times, was a model for Lively's strong, independent female characters (Claudia in *Moon Tiger*, Lorna and Molly in *Consequences*, Stella in *Spiderweb* etc)

I believe the book can be related to what we call nowadays "the witness discourse", even if it is "second-hand witnessing", so to say, since Lively herself did not go through the all the experiences she describes, but she was rather a witness of other people's ordeal. She proceeds to giving a voice to those who can no longer speak for themselves, either by inserting in her own memoir pieces of their correspondence, or by relating their stories in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular; the stories are all the more touching as we know this is no longer fiction, but real facts. Here is a description of what the Blitz meant (the sustained bombing of Britain by the Nazi Germany which led to the evacuation from London of millions of people to the countryside). The memories in the chapter dealing with this event are triggered by a needlework sampler made by her grandmother, in which six of these evacuee children, boarding at Golsoncott are to be seen. Here are some comments on the arrival of "the skinnies" (called like that because of the precarious living conditions in the city, involving lack of hygiene and food):

The platforms packed with little figures slung about with gas masks, cardboard suitcases, brown paper parcels. The interminable journeys without sustenance or lavatories; the late night arrivals at some unknown destination where sharp-eyed hosts waited to pounce on the least unappealing-looking evacuees [...] Parents had to say goodbye without knowing how or when they would see their children again (HU 46).

Lively's empathy with these children is all the more accounted for by her own experience as a child immigrating into her own native country, whose customs and landscape were totally unknown to her and where she grew up in a boarding school, away from her disinterested parents.

Remembering is the key aspect in memoir writing; so is the case with Lively's whole body of work, all the more with her memoirs. The unreliable nature of memories compensated by the ability of the human mind to complete and interpret the reminiscences populating it, plus the subjectivity that accompanies any point of view make any act of writing about the past, especially one's own past, an endeavor full of challenges and unexpected rewards. Penelope Lively's merit is that she managed to put remembrance to such use as to share more than just personal, scattered memories: she turned personal experience into an instrument of examination of collective memories, while casting light on the sources of her authorial self, which grants a more nuanced understanding of her fiction.

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