

NOSTALGIA FOR A LOST HOME:

EXILE AND TRAUMA IN LUCETTE LAGNADO'S MEMOIRS

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INTRODUCTION

Memory is like a pile of disarranged papers when blown by the winds of trauma. To think of memory is to think of the traces one leaves; that is, to remember and become remembered. That is because memory can create home when a home is nowhere, and one is exiled. Yet again, to remember is to strive to recall truth and history as a witness. That is the role of the memoirist; to become a sort of a literary historian, lest the story should be forgotten. There is, thus, this urgent imperative or call to tell what happened and to be assured that one can be believed and listened to, that memoirists are witnesses but also the creators of witnesses, their readers.

The Jewish Egyptian author Lucette Lagnado chose to write and historicize the details of her family's exodus from Cairo to New York in her two memoirs: *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: A Jewish Family's Exodus from the Old Cairo to the New World* (2008) and *The Arrogant Years: One Girl's Search for Her Lost Youth, from Cairo to Brooklyn* (2011). The former focuses on the life of her father Leon, a charming boulevardier who befriends the city's social elites and even frequents King Farouk to play poker with him. The latter revolves around the

life of her mother Edith, a brilliant, intelligent, and gorgeous woman.

Lagnado documented the injustices that her family and thousands of other Jewish families had to endure in Egypt in the mid-1950s. Back then, these Jews represented a significant part of the Egyptian community. The Jewish community in Egypt succeeded in achieving prosperity on the social and economic levels, which allowed community leaders to gain political and financial influence and to form strong connections with the Royal Palace. When the Jews in Europe suffered from various forms of persecution, including anti-Semitism, the Jews in Egypt lived in harmony with all the other ethnic groups. Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived together for a long time without religious fanaticism, while every community preserved its personal, social, and religious identity.¹ In one of her interviews, Lagnado lamented a time when “80,000 Jews lived in Egypt in the ‘30s and ‘40s. When there was all this persecution going on in Europe, they were fine. They were becoming pashas, and the Jews and the Muslims and the Copts [Coptic Christians] were animated by the same value for family, for closeness.”²

However, after the establishment of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948 and with the Free Officers Revolution, the situation for the Jews of Egypt changed drastically. The Arabic and the Egyptian armies entered a war against the state of Israel. In a total disorder, the Egyptian government arrested hundreds of Zionist and communist Jews. Many violent demonstrations attacked Jewish neighborhoods in Cairo and Alexandria, and 15,000 to 70,000 Jews left the country or were expelled by the beginning of World War II.³ Lagnado’s family was among these thousands of others who witnessed multiple forms of oppression and ended up leaving under duress the only country they had ever known.

Lagnado’s memoirs recorded all these historical events and their aftermath on her family in detail. She wrote about the abrupt rupture from the homeland, the ordeal of a Jewish family, and its downfall from heaven to poverty. All these personal vicissitudes fed her writings. This home rupture was significantly traumatizing for Lagnado as well as her family. This is especially obvious through the sense of nostalgia that prevails in her memoirs, nightmares, a sense of displacement, and the fragmentation of the family members.

EXILE AS A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

In Lagnado’s memoirs, exile becomes a traumatic event that destroys and distorts the lives of every member of her family. Depicting exile that comes as a result of the separation from the homeland, Edward Said defines it as “is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home.”⁴ Home rupture is not a matter of choice. It is rather an experience that is inflicted upon the individuals, and that chooses them. Said argues that the condition of exile is:

[N]ot ... a privilege, but ... an alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life. Exile is not, after all, a matter of choice: you are born into it, or it

¹ A.A. Ali, *The Jews of Egypt, Barons and Wretched: Historical Study* (Cairo: Etrac for Printing, Publishing & Distribution, 1997), p. 13 [our translation].

² S. Simon, “‘The Arrogant Years’: An Egyptian Family in Exile,” <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/transcripts/140515453> [access: 1.05.2022].

³ A.A. Ali, op. cit., p. 219 [our translation].

⁴ E.W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 173.

happens to you. But, provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity.⁵

Therefore, exile provokes feelings of uprootedness and nonbelonging. These feelings increase, especially when the exile comes to realize that the homeland is out of reach and there is no way back home. Said calls the absence of location “a perilous territory of not-belonging” that leads to an identity crisis.⁶ By the same token, Amy Kaminsky implies that exile, whether forced or voluntary, is a form of a “presence-in-absence” that is defined by “what is missing, not by what it contains.”⁷ Hence, this change of condition heightens feelings of emptiness and loss.

André Aciman, whose experience of exile inspired many of his writings, defines exile as a condition of loss and bewilderment. The exile, in his view, is “not just someone who has lost [her] home; it is someone who can’t find another, who can’t think of another. Some no longer even know what home means.”⁸ The exile is also very mobile as she is constantly in a search of a different home that bears some resemblance to the old one since the “new home bears no relationship to the old.”⁹ All exiles, in his view, tend to be searching for “... their homeland abroad, to bridge the things here to things there, to rewrite the present so as not to write off the past [and] to rescue things everywhere, as though by restoring them here [the exile] might restore them elsewhere as well.”¹⁰ Scholars such as Aciman and Said, among many others, agree on the traumatizing aspects of the home rupture. It provokes uprootedness, psychological turmoil, and emotional partition. Trauma theory as conceptualized by Cathy Caruth and Judith Lewis Herman can also illuminate the analysis of Lagnado’s memoirs. Trauma, concerning exile, is interesting because it is about the “when” and the “where.” It puts these notions at stake since it disrupts this when and where.

Thanks to *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* and the full-length study of trauma *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth is regarded as the founding mother of the trauma theory. The term “trauma theory” was used for the first time, after Freud, in the former book. The term “trauma” in ancient Greek refers to the wound inflicted upon the body. Caruth refers to trauma as “the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world—[that] is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that ... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known.”¹¹ Trauma, according to Caruth, is as an “event [that] is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time.”¹²

Trauma is a shocking experience that challenges our distinction not only between the past and the present, but also between the here and there. Caruth implies that trauma, at the moment of its occurrence, is registered as a non-experience, but is experienced at a dif-

⁵ Ibidem, p. 184.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 177.

⁷ A. Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politics: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 30.

⁸ A. Aciman (ed.), *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss* (New York: The New Press, 1999), p. 21.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 13.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 21.

¹¹ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4.

¹² Ibidem, p. 8.

ferent time and space in the forms of “repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.”¹³ These repressed memories haunt the survivor and keep her trapped in an ever-ending nostalgia. Svetlana Boym refers to nostalgia as “... the disease of an afflicted imagination, [which] incapacitated the body.”¹⁴ In her view, homesickness “exhausted the ‘viral spirits,’ causing nausea, loss of appetite, pathological changes in the lungs, brain inflammation, cardiac arrests, high fever, as well as marasmus and a propensity for suicide.”¹⁵ Therefore, it can be said that trauma has a disruptive and repetitive nature since it disrupts the life of the survivor and her relationship with her environment and keeps her haunted by images from the original traumatic incident.

In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman develops a theory that focuses mainly on the comprehension and treatment of trauma. Herman defines trauma as “an affliction of the powerless.”¹⁶ To understand the traumatic incidents, Herman implies that the survivor should begin with a rediscovery of the past. This rediscovery of the past starts with the construction of a narrative about the trauma incident. In her view, there are three stages in the process of trauma recovery: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life.¹⁷ However, she claims that “[l]ike any abstract concept, these stages of recovery are a convenient fiction, not to be taken too literally. They are an attempt to impose simplicity and order upon a process that is inherently turbulent and complex.”¹⁸ These three stages can be very helpful when studying trauma narratives. Herman also implies that the second stage can be overwhelming for the survivor since it requires the in-depth narration of the entire trauma story.¹⁹ Telling the trauma story is extremely painful. It provokes intense feelings of sorrow and countless tears.

THE MULTIPLE FACES OF TRAUMA

Trauma in the memoirs of Lagnado can be traced through nightmares. Lagnado’s dreams about her cat Pouspous that she had to abandon before leaving Egypt keep haunting her the very first year in exile. She claims:

That first year in America, I often woke up with a start after dreaming of Pouspous. Lying there on my Macy’s coat I’d think about my cat in Egypt and burst out crying. Had Pouspous even survived? I’d wonder. Had she managed on her own, with none of us to look after her on Malika Nazli? I was agitated my father had to be summoned to reassure me, though I was past the age when I trusted him as completely as I had the day we left Cairo.²⁰

Lagnado’s dreams about her cat Pouspous return intrusively and insistently, as shown through the use of the adverb “often.” The repetition of these dreams also emphasizes the haunting aspect of trauma. This justifies Caruth’s claims that trauma at the moment of its

¹³ Ibidem, p. 91.

¹⁴ S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 4.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 4.

¹⁶ J. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 33.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 110.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 140.

²⁰ L. Lagnado, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: My Family’s Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), p. 219.

occurrence is “not fully grasped ... but return[s] later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena” and keeps haunting the survivor.²¹ Pouspous can be regarded as Lagnado’s double in the sense that they are both uprooted and lost. Pondering about the cat’s situation in Lagnado’s absence can also reflect her fear about her future and about what awaits her in exile. Pouspous can be seen as an enigma of Egypt and losing him can stand for the loss of the home country.

Dreams, according to Freud, are “*a (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed, repressed) wish.*”²² In other words, dreams reflect Lagnado’s desire and wish to go back to her home country and to recover what has been taken by force. Time is supposed to heal Lagnado from her wounds but it only creates a gap between her and her father since she no longer trusts him. In other words, mistrust is increased by the passing of time. This proves Herman’s view that when the survivor feels her body is violated, she can no longer trust neither herself nor the others.²³ Furthermore, Lagnado’s use of rhetorical questions calls attention to her psychological condition. The rhetorical questions underscore the fact that she is becoming hysterical and desperate. We also notice that Lagnado’s condition signals seriousness and emergency made obvious through the use of the expression “had to be summoned” as if she were drowning and in need of help.

The comeback of Pouspous in her dreams signifies the comeback of the thought of home, in other word nostalgia. Nostalgia conveys the feeling of being exiled from home, of yearning to return to what is familiar, the homeliness of surroundings. Thus, it is about the place and the feeling resulting from displacement. The mention of “Pouspous,” “Malika Nazli,” and “Egypt” contributes to highlighting this sense of displacement. The return of these familiar places and Pouspous in the form of thoughts, questions, and worries rather than memories that bring joy conveys the abrupt separation between the exiled girl and her home of origin on the micro-level and of the Jewish exile experience on the macro-level. Moreover, the return of the repressed in trauma can be linked to the survivor’s desire to find home where there is not any. The use of the adverb of frequency “often” reveals that the speaker is caught in a vicious circle where the startling is repeated, as if trauma as a wound were always open. But since it is an open wound, nostalgia has to do with time, the distorted version of time as an aftermath of trauma. Time, here, becomes fixed as opposed to the chronological time that brings change. There is a denial of this change in time, but also in place, as if trauma was the only defining aspect of time, be it past or present. Lagnado refuses to establish a new connection with the outer world as a result of her trauma; the past, thus, becomes the only place and time where meaning resides.

The trauma of home rupture can also be read through flashbacks. Lagnado’s memoirs are swamped with flashbacks about the home country. These flashbacks often appear when Lagnado compares her miserable situation in exile to that of the bourgeois lifestyle she used to enjoy in Egypt. Being at school in Paris with her classmates who belong to the working-class triggers in Lagnado an overflow of flashbacks about her school days in Cairo. She looks back to those years with great fondness and recalls every detail about the first day at school. She says:

²¹ C. Caruth, op. cit., p. 91.

²² S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), p. 183 [italics in the original].

²³ J. Herman, op. cit., p. 37.

I thought yearningly back to my gray-and-white jumper with the embroidered crest, the uniform of the Lycée Français de Bab-el-Louk. My first day at school, I'd walked round and round the courtyard with my friends, feeling terribly stylish and grown-up in my elegant cotton dress. My books were in brown leather satchel my father purchased for me and which I carried in my arms, *comme les grandes filles* – like the older girls.²⁴

Lagnado keeps in her memory the country of her origin since she used to feel there “terribly stylish” and “elegant.” In contrast, in exile, she feels “widely inferior . . . awkward and out of place,” which makes her suffer “in silence, not daring to complain.”²⁵ The past is also depicted through the senses, especially touch. Lagnado remembers the fabrics of her school uniform. Feelings and impressions about the fabrics are also expressed in detail as if it was not past. Hence, flashbacks have a dissociative aspect since the past and the present can be confused. We also notice a sense of loss reflected through the use of code-switching. Lagnado tends to speak French, which was her first language in Egypt, when she feels nostalgic for her home country. The use of code-switching reflects her sense of displacement and non-belonging.

In Lagnado's memoirs, the family's journey from Cairo to New York seems to be a journey of disintegration. This is especially evidenced in the following passage:

There was no family left anymore, not really. My siblings increasingly were going off on their own. Suzette was ensconced in one of her ever-changing Queens high-rises . . . My brothers were still with us, but they had their friends, their own lives really, and were rarely at home. This was all terribly painful for my mother, who felt she was watching the family disintegrate yet seemed helpless to stop it.²⁶

The fact that the family started to disintegrate once in exile speaks volumes in relation to trauma and exile. The family is, metaphorically speaking, the individual's first ground of safety. This ground of safety started to dismantle the moment the family came to “settle” on the ground of non-belonging. It can be said, thus, that this ground of non-belonging was infectious. It is at this particular stage that we can especially speak of time and place that are fragmented and fragmenting. This fragmentation in time and place is expressed in the language of the narration. There is the abrupt change and shift; there is the casting of doubt, particularly conveyed through words like “not really,” “but,” “yet.” These words, conjunctions, and adverbs establish a discrepancy between what was expected and hoped, and what was found and witnessed. There is a blatant shift from the collective to the individual specifically expressed through the discrepancy between words like “the family,” “us,” and “siblings,” on the one hand, and “their friends” and “their lives,” on the other hand. There is an emphasis on this family being torn apart particularly expressed through words like “own.” Hence, the mother becomes the epitome of stillness; she is passive; there is some learned helplessness. All she does is watch her family collapsing and vanishing. The family's story becomes a microcosm of the fate of the Jewish community in general. This is especially intriguing if we relate it to the genre that Lagnado opted for: the memoir. The memoir, in this sense, wavers between the personal and the communal; it is a memoir of the individual, the individual as a representative of the community.

²⁴ L. Lagnado, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit...*, op. cit., p. 182.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 182.

²⁶ L. Lagnado, *The Arrogant Years: One Girl's Search for Her Lost Youth, from Cairo to Brooklyn* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), pp. 135–136.

Delving once again into this idea of the ground as a metaphor for the homeland and the family, it becomes clear for us that there is a connection between trauma and exile. While family represented a glimmer of hope in this unknown country, the fact that the mother was watching as her only safe cocoon, the family, is being torn apart is quite evocative. She is, metaphorically speaking, the farmer whose land and crops are being uprooted by a hurricane, a traumatic event. This state of stillness that we notice in the character of the mother as the mute witness brings to our mind the idea of the *tableau vivant*, a living picture, a static scene of the person who watches but does not do anything besides. It is a recurrence of the trauma that was lived at home and outside. This learned helplessness that makes of the mother a *tableau vivant* cuts right at the core of Jewish studies since it is a leitmotif in Jewish memoirs and films about the Jewish community. One may think, for instance, of the girl with the red coat in *Schindler's List*. It is a moment of frozenness and meaninglessness in terms of time and place.

Lagnado's mother Edith, on the other hand, was obsessed with the idea of drawing the family members closer together again. We notice the excessive repetition of the sentence "Il faut reconstruire le foyer You must rebuild the hearth."²⁷ This sentence is repeated in both languages, French and English. Repeating this line denotes the fixation of the mother who seems to be "so desperate to keep [them] all together, to sort of re-attain [their] lost grandeur from Egypt."²⁸ The mother is "obsessed with the notion of reconstructing what [they] had left behind on Malika Nazli Street. She [longs] to pull [her] family back together again, to re-create a semblance of the home that [they] had lost, and it was as if she believed she could do it bit by bit, piece by piece, with pillowcases, towels and spoons."²⁹ However, "[t]he hearth had never been rebuilt. The hearth was gone," claims Lagnado.³⁰ This highlights the impossibility of the task of recreating home in the space of exile. The hearth is a part of home and the impossibility of building a hearth equates the impossibility of recreating home. Thus, the hearth here is a synecdoche, a part that stands for the whole that is the home.

The impact of trauma is also reflected through the family's sense of displacement. While they were in Paris still negotiating where to settle, in America or Israel, the Lagnados received some troubling news that left them perplexed:

"Ils ont assassiné votre président!" the porter was shouting toward our window – They have killed your president! My family looked at one another, thoroughly befuddled. Had Nasser been murdered in Egypt? Had they assassinated King Farouk in his Italian exile? Or was it General de Gaulle who had been killed here in Paris? It took a few minutes before we realized that "our president" was the president of the United States. John F. Kennedy was dead.³¹

There is an emphasis on the idea of non-belongingness of the family that is expressed through language. This is especially laid bare through the use of words related to countries and nationalities, but also names of presidents: "Egypt," "King Farouk," "Italian," "General de Gaulle," "Paris," "United States," "John F. Kennedy."³² This welter of references conveys a crisis of identity and belonging. The porter's announcement leads the family to put its iden-

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 146.

²⁸ S. Simon, op. cit.

²⁹ L. Lagnado, *The Arrogant Years...*, op. cit., p. 146.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 305.

³¹ L. Lagnado, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit...*, op. cit., p. 199.

³² Ibidem.

tity at stake. It is the word “our,” a possessive adjective, that triggers their belonging problem. This “our” becomes meaningless because to be exiled is to suffer from the inability to find one’s “own” home; it is a problem of possession and belonging. The tearing and disintegration, thus, do not happen on the family level alone, but also in terms of citizenship, that is, in terms of the national identity. The fact that the family took some time until they realized what was meant by “your president” tells of how tormented, but also socially and psychologically disintegrated and shattered they are. It is not the word “assassin” that put them in this dilemma; it is the word “our.”

CONCLUSION

Exile is a traumatic experience that leaves the survivor trapped in nostalgia. The impact of home rupture can be seen on both the individual and the community as a whole. Through the memoir genre, Lagnado succeeded in commemorating the injustices that her family and thousands of Jews of Egypt witnessed at the beginning of the 1950s, which led to their exile. This proves Herman’s view about the importance of turning trauma memories into a narrative while echoing Freud’s therapeutic methods, especially his idea of the talking cure which is about the ability to share one’s story. Ann Kaplan, on the other hand, suggests that trauma “can never be ‘healed’” in the sense that things can never return to what they used to be before the traumatic incident.³³

Some trauma injuries cannot be healed, but they can be worked through when they are “translated via art.”³⁴ Dominick LaCapra similarly highlights the importance of writing when he claims: “... writing is a medium for expressing a content, and its ideal goal is to be transparent to content or an open window on the past—with figures of rhetoric serving only an instrumental role in illustrating what could be expressed without loss in literal terms.”³⁵ This highlights the importance of writing as a means of sublimation that eventually leads to growth and the understanding of trauma. Lagnado’s testimony also underscores the role of the reader, who herself becomes an eye-witness to all this suffering and a second voice to this history. The reader thus eventually becomes enlisted in the service of the memoirist’s cause.

³³ A.E. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 19.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

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SUMMARY

This paper seeks to study exile as a traumatic experience by focusing on the multiple manifestations of trauma in the memoirs of the Jewish-Egyptian writer Lucette Lagnado. Exile, in Edward Said's view, "is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (Said 2000: 173). Lagnado chose writing to voice the trauma of exile of the whole Jewish Egyptian community expelled from Egypt after the establishment of the state of Israel and the arrival of the Free Officers to power in 1952. In Lagnado's memoirs, trauma re-surfaces in different places and times, through flashbacks and nightmares. These unwanted and suppressed memories reemerge involuntarily and keep Lagnado trapped in an ever-ending nostalgia. Both Caruth's work on trauma and Herman's analysis of the three stages of trauma recovery will help us better understand the place of trauma in Lagnado's memoirs.

KEYWORDS

exile, trauma, Said, flashbacks, nightmares, memoirs, Caruth, Herman