Tastes and Fragrances from the Old World: Memoirs by Egyptian Jewish Women.
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History tells us that cosmopolitanism for the Jews has been an adaptive instrument for a persecuted people without a homeland, a people who always had to be prepared to flee and move on to another refuge. It is also true that cosmopolitanism is a deeply rooted feature in classical Arab-Islamic cultural heritage. The geographical location of the Arab Mediterranean, extending across frontiers and in different historical periods, from Spain to the Levant and beyond, has always made it a commercial, intellectual, strategic and sacred place visited by merchants, scholars, soldiers and believers of many ethnicities and cultural traditions. As such, it has served as a virtual cauldron of globally significant and critical events. The cosmopolitan qualities and this region's identity as a cross-road of global encounters rendered it particularly tolerant to Jewish presence, the historical record tells us. Arab Andalusia is, of course, particularly exalted as embodying Arab cosmopolitanism. Recently, scholars of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Arab world have been keen to point to the Mediterranean basin as more richly embodying cosmopolitanism than might be suggested by certain events witnessed during that period: phenomena such as the rise of geographically specific nationalisms, such as Egypt’s, belie the cultural, political, economic and intellectual inclusiveness that in fact attracted Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews to the region, and that housed the Karaaite Jewish community for centuries.

At its broadest level this essay is about how cosmopolitanism and the presence of Jews in Egypt, indeed as in the rest of the Arab Mediterranean, is not a phenomenon that belongs only to the far-distant past (a la Amitov Ghosh’s In An Antique Land, for example), but one that has a more recent presence. It is an attempt to steer discussions away from the two tendencies that seem to have dominated the production of scholarship on Jews of the Arab Mediterranean in the last generation. On the one hand, lachrymose narratives obfuscate the history Jews share with Arab Muslims and Christians, suggesting that the need for a Jewish state was axiomatic and that the movement of Jewish people out of the greater Arab Islamic world was both inevitable and necessary. On the other hand, more recent, nostalgic literature, written, mainly in the form of memoirs and interviews, seems to marginalize the very real fault-lines in cosmopolitanism that the WWI era and its aftermath witnessed. I call attention to these approaches, not for the reductive purpose of exposing inconsistency, on the contrary, I draw on these approaches as indications of some of the unique operations of the politics of memory in the region. Both arguments intersect with global moments and Jewish minority affiliations. In what follows, I focus on the intersection of these approaches with gender, as well as global moments and minority affiliations, as seen in a selection of memoirs by women who found themselves displaced and exiled from Egypt.

I take the The Man in the White Sharkskin Suite by Lucette Lagnato, Claudia Roden’s A Book of Middle Eastern Food and The Book of Jewish Food, and Colette Rossant’s first in a series of three memoirs ‘Memory of a Lost Egypt: a Memoir with Recipes”. Recounting their lifestories is not the point of this essay but, rather, its point of departure to speak about cuisine and facets of human attachments along gender lines. While both Roden and Rossant are cookbook-memoirs and Lagnato has written a straightforward memoir, food-knowledge transmitted by women in the wake of a painful rupture feature in all three author’s reconstructions of Egypt. For this reason these memoirs also speak to a series of issues that gender studies ceaselessly debate: cultural heritage and change, homeland and nurturing, pristine and fluid lives. Though greatly variant, I argue that all three memoirs come out in terms of gender, cosmopolitan and minority affiliation that would not have surfaced in these forms if not for the experience of rupture. Attention here is paid to the ways in which memories of the past are activated and shaped by contemporary cultural, political and social engagement. I propose that within ‘minority memoirs’ there is a value in gender for the study of cosmopolitanism and the politics of memory – and vice versa, as along the way there is also certain values of cosmopolitanism and memory for the study of gender.

Mutuality in the Arab Mediterranean

Egypt’s cosmopolitan moment was between 1850s and 1950s. It marks the end of one imperial rule – the Ottoman – and the continuation of another – the British. During that period cosmopolitan spaces were created. Armenians, Levantines, Italians, Greeks, Swiss, Germans, French, and British joined exploration teams; mixed tribunals, chancelleries and over-seas banks. They participated at the cotton exchange; roads and railways were constructed; missions were set up; hospitals, schools and sporting clubs were built, and holiday resorts were developed. And during WW1 and WW2 cities like Port Said,
Alexandria and Cairo became safe havens, surrounded by international crises elsewhere in Western Asia and Europe. Persecution in Europe saw the arrival of Jews to Egypt. At the time the Jewish population was spread across all social backgrounds: the politically active Jewry; middle-class Jews who were educated in French; the nonrabbinate Karaite Jews; and the haute bourgeoisie (Beinin 1998). Rites and regional origin distinguish the various subgroups. Cairo and Alexandria had Jewish quarters, yet their Jewish communities shared neighbourhoods along socioeconomic positions, rather than ethnic or religious affiliations, with members of other foreign and Egyptian communities (Abu Ghar 2004; Ilbert Yannakakis and Hassoun 1997). In 1948 an estimated 80,000 Jews lived in Egypt (Beinin 1998:2), close to the mid-sixties the demographic structure changed and an estimate of 15,000 Jews remained in the country. The families of Roden, Rossant and Lagnado, like most of the population in Egypt, were caught up between the post-colonial independence movements, crises of realpolitik like that over the Suez Canal, and the establishment of the state of Israel which challenged the cosmopolitan ambience of the region, and—with it—life in the Old World.

Salvaging fragments of life from the old world, the memoirs bring forth food culture from that life. We notice incidents in the books when, in spite of the celebratory tone, there is an edge of a more poignant message that life was good then it changed. When women in the memoirs recreate culinary continuities in their kitchens it is with the awareness of the rift brought about by exile. We learn how Egyptian Jewish women in the diaspora continue to organize and observe traditional culinary sacraments and celebrations. Births, weddings, birthdays, funerals and religious rites each have their iconic cuisines described, prepared and served in their very own ritualistic ways. As in the Old World it is the women who uphold the value of ‘originary’ cuisine.

Lucette Lagnado was only 6 in 1963, when her father, The Man in the White Sharkskin Suite, capitulated to the hostile climate toward Jews in Egypt, and agreed to move with his family to the United States. Unlike the stories of so many Jewish immigrants, this story is about how her parents did not adapt to life in New York. Contrary to Egypt, rice in the New World did not come unpollished with small stones and bits of straws in twenty-kilo sacks; instead it was ‘milky white’ and sealed in cardboard. Back in Egypt good Jewish housewives performed the vital Passover task of sorting out the rice for impurities seven times. Even though rice in America is purified, processed and hermetically preserved, the Lagnado women continued to inspect each grain of rice to sanitize it for the holiday. It was only several years after their arrival to New York that Lucette realized that European Jews did not eat rice during Passover. Surrounded by hostile Jews with unfamiliar eating habits she recounts her family’s Passover Seder in Brooklyn: ‘No matter how loudly we sang, our holiday had become not a celebration of the exodus from Egypt but the inverse - a longing to return to the place we were supposedly glad to have left.’ (2007:263)

Although Claudia Roden’s family migration to London was experienced as less traumatic than Lagnado, also they continued to talk intensely about Egypt and the life they left behind, ‘…it seemed that we had never left Cairo.’ From her kitchen in England her mother continued to reproduce tastes and fragrances from the Old World: ‘The smell of sizzling garlic and crushed coriander seeds in the kitchen, or of rose water in a pudding, and my mother’s daily meals, reinforced the feeling’ (Roden 1999:4). Claudia Roden describes how when her sociable and typical Jewish mother served her English Jewish guests ‘sesame bracelets, little cheese pies and nut-filled pastries’ (Roden 1999:15), they showed concern: ‘Are you sure you are Jewish?’ was the customary question (ibid.). When Colette Rossant was five her Jewish Egyptian father became seriously ill in Paris and the family moved to her paternal grandparents in Cairo. Her father died when she was seven years old, and her French mother abandoned her. In Egypt she lived with her grandparents till she was fifteen, when her mother decided that Colette needed to move to her maternal grandmother in Paris to become more French. In contrast to her French grandmother, Rossant describes her Egyptian family life as closely associated in various ways with food and with the pleasure to satisfy ones appetite. For Rossant Egypt provided family, conviviality and nourishment, filling the void of her absent mother. In her memoir she recalls her regular outings with her grandmother, with immense delight; they enjoyed Egyptian street food which she continues to cook in her American kitchen.

At several points Lagnado, Roden and Rossant lurch ahead in time as they visit still-living relatives and family friends to research their books, measuring a dish from childhood and youth. Their nostalgic energy and Egyptian Jewish affiliation counter the myth that cuisine is a direct, authentic and uncomplicated channel back to the old world. They give us entry points into what displacement and exile might mean for changing food memory practices. This is all done in a way that keeps issues linked to the question of historic moments in the ordinary experiences of people. We learn something more about the movement of cuisine, and particularly how women are the zealous carriers and keepers of culinary knowledge and practices. Meals are not fleeting; the memoirs remind us that when
Egyptian women cook their meals in exile they are recreating a bygone era. Lucette Lagnado, Claudia Roden and Collette Rossant tell us what we in effect know: that the consumption of food is connected to all else in human life, including previous and future such acts of consumption.

References