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REMEMBERING THE LOST EDEN IN MARINA BENJAMIN'S *LAST DAYS IN BABYLON: THE STORY OF THE JEWS OF BAGHDAD*

Leila Aouadi

Last Days in Babylon: The Story of the Jews of Baghdad (2007) explores the past life of Baghdadi Jews in the first decades of the previous century. In retrieving the splintered pieces of her own family's history in Baghdad, Marina Benjamin embarks on a journey to Iraq after the American invasion of 2004. To move beyond war and devastation, Last Days straddles the borders between facts and fiction, remembering and forgetting, and in so doing conflates memory and history, nostalgia and writing. The mapping of Jewish Iraqi heritage onto the colonized landscape becomes a process of identification with the city, whereby Regina's life, the author's grandmother, is evoked as a sort of index to Baghdad before and after the departure of its Jewish minority. The Proustian vein that undergirds the narrative further implicates colonialism and its legacy in the ongoing plight of Iraqi people, including the few remaining Jews in Baghdad. Nostalgia/memory and reeling off past events from fragments cannot be conjugated without the gruesome present of Iraq and the Middle East. In this context, memories fail in assuaging the present pain and serve only to foreground suffering and helplessness.

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Contemporary life narratives of colonized or exiled subjects draw on histories of dispossession and displacement. In dramatizing the nostalgic act of remembering past lives and lost homes, the autobiographical and fictional rely on memory to reproduce the written text; autobiographical memory is shaped by narrative convention, that is, the formal order of a story: a beginning, a middle, and an end. Yet memory and remembering do not always respect linearity, nor is it always voluntary. While a memoir is structured within a storyline in order to be read, the assimilation of memories in the textual fabric can be unsettling due to nostalgic affinities and historical inconsistencies. The flow of emotions when past events and memories are evoked or triggered unravels the functioning of nostalgia as a vessel channelling not only joy and pain but also the human need to belong geographically. The dimension of time and space in recalling emotions is intertwined with places and embroiled in the politics of belonging. Despite being associated more with the idea of absence and atrophy, of forgetting as well as remembering, memory has a political nexus and is at

the centre of many debates concerning the right to remember and narrate. The ‘unprecedented politicization of memory’ is a form of appropriating a new meaning to the past from present perspectives in the writing of personal accounts.¹ Politicizing memory continues apace and can be traced in the burgeoning of life narratives by women from Middle Eastern origins and minorities, where writing acts are shaped by present junctures and devastating wars. Thus, Middle Eastern writing contexts have transformed memory into a political will to challenge the present, channel resistance, and offer different future visions.

The politicization of memory permeates Middle Eastern literature in general and life narratives in particular. In her essay ‘Remembering a Baghdad Elsewhere: An Emotional Cartography’ (2014), Ella Shohat proposes an autobiographical reading of her life and that of her Iraqi family in their host country, Israel, after leaving Baghdad, as a trajectory of ‘taboo memories’ and ‘forbidden reminiscence’ and highlights the manoeuvring of remembering and forgetting/erasing in the face of exile and the immigrants’ need to survive ‘diasporizations’.² Her reading, which partakes of colonial theories, discusses the Arab-Israeli conflict as a cornerstone in forming an Israeli national identity and forcing such polarized distinction between Arabs versus Jews on its immigrants. The socio-economic division within Israel between Arabs and European Jews, who work to discipline, correct, and normalize the young generations of Arab Jewish immigrants in the newly formed state, bears witness to the marginalization of Eastern Jews within the dominant ‘Euro-Israeli culture’.³ The stifling of their memories and ditching of their Arab Jewish identity and language have nourished nostalgic affinities with the past and despite being a private enterprise, nostalgia has become an act of political enunciation for many Iraqi Jews in Israel.⁴ Shohat’s family had to migrate to the USA in order to live as Arab Jews without being forced to stifle their Arabness and hide their Baghdadi dialect. In the same vein, this essay explores *Last Days in Babylon: The Story of the Jews of Baghdad* (2007) by Marina Benjamin, a British author whose all-encompassing life narrative retrieves the past of the Iraqi Jewish community of Baghdad by incorporating historical, social, and

¹ Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz, ‘Introduction: Mapping Memory,’ in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 1-10; p. 2.

² Ella Shohat, ‘Remembering a Baghdad Elsewhere: An Emotional Cartography’, *Biography*, 37. 3 (2014), pp. 784-790; p. 784.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 786.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 784.

political events of Iraq and the Middle East. The memoir, though personal, is a political pronouncement against colonial intervention and Western hegemony. Benjamin tries to make sense of the *reductio ad absurdum* of the war that is raging at the time of her visit to Iraq in 2004, after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. This essay contends that the trip to Baghdad during the war is a journey into the past, an attempt to project the stories of Regina, her grandmother, and by implication the Jewish community in Iraq, onto the present of a war-mutilated Baghdad.

To write is both to remember and to forget, to negotiate from present positioning the past, whereby memory becomes the reality of the text and despite being evasive remains a source of knowledge notwithstanding its factual unreliability. Nostalgia in Arabic poetry is rooted in experiences of war and exile. Historically, mystic Andalusian poetry exemplifies how Jewish and Muslim Arab poets transformed their longing for divine unity into moving elegies in response to the cataclysmic loss of Andalusia, an exceptional model of coexistence between different religions in an anti-Semitic Europe before its capture by the Spanish army and the expulsion of Jews and Arabs.⁵ Jewish Arabs had always been part of Arab societies and culture. Their existence in the Middle East and forced mass departure from many Arab countries have been the theme of many memoirs by female authors living in exile such as *Sipping from the Nile: My Exodus from Egypt* (2008) by Jean Naggar, *Dream Homes: From Cairo to Katrina, an Exile's Journey* (2008) by Zonana Joyce, and *Memories from Eden: A Journey through Jewish Baghdad* by Violette Shamash (2010), to mention only a few.

Nostalgia in Arabic literature is a theme and a stylistic device structuring the classic Arab poem, the ode, which has a set of conventions, namely remembering the camp where the poet used to meet his beloved. The meeting site becomes a symbol of love where past images are triggered by the poet's visits to the place after the departure of his beloved, and reads oftentimes as a resuscitation of a time long gone.⁶ The poet visits and revisits familiar places in order to evoke memory, with these sites serving as

⁵ The term can be seen as problematic but many Jews are natives of the Arab land; for further discussion see Ella Shohat's *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1989), as well as Evelyn Alsultany's interview with Shohat in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms*, ed. by Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), pp. 46-59, and Yahouda Shenhav's *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁶ It is worth noting that once consummated, this much celebrated love ends in disappointment and parting.

a substitute for their absent muse/beloved. This in turn triggers the poet's flames of passion whereby the site becomes as necessary as the process of remembering itself. The platonic love⁷ that characterizes much of the old Arab poetry is nostalgic in nature due to gender segregation, the nature of nomadic life, and the strict social rules in the Arabian Peninsula.⁸ In 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents' (2007), Svetlana Boym compares longing for home to nostalgic love, surviving only 'in a long distance relationship' while Roberta Rubenstein argues that longing for home is but longing for time.⁹ Temporal dislocation is crucial in understanding both critical moments regarding the pain of loss and longing that accompanies yearning for a lost home or lost love. Just like the Arab poet's nostalgic love for a fading face, an inchoate silhouette, and a vanishing image that they celebrate in their love poetry, nostalgia and platonic love share the common ground of restoring an irretrievable past.¹⁰ This understanding of loss and retrieval as a necessary channel in writing about one's life alongside that of one's country, family, and community applies to Benjamin's nostalgic love for a Baghdad she does not know and can only revive through her grandmother's stories and her own writing that strives to endow the past with legitimate existence in her life now.

Nostalgia is a lynchpin connecting history and memory in the writing of the memoir. To recall the past at times of war in order to understand the present requires historical lenses and is the central theme of *Last Days*. Benjamin, who decides to go to Iraq via Jordan, is undertaking a perilous journey across the desert. By passing cities such as Ramadi and Falluja, the memoirist experiences the devastating scenes of war first-hand and realizes the difference between watching scenes of war on TV from a distant and comfortable position in London and coming face-to-face with its gruesome effect in Baghdad. Benjamin engages Western presence in Iraq through the lens of an old barber who outlived American and British colonialism. According to the barber,

⁷ Called in Arabic, *al hob al othri*: *hob* is love and *othri* is virgin, which connotes the asexual nature of the relation between the poet and his beloved.

⁸ For further information on pre-Islamic poetry and Arab Jews' contribution to literature and art see, for example, *Classical Arabic Literature: A Library of Arabic Literature Anthology*, ed. and trans. by Geert Jan van Gelder (New York: New York University Press, 2013) and Norman A. Stillman, 'The Jews of the Medieval Islamic West: Acculturation and its Limitations', *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 9.3 (2018), pp. 293-300.

⁹ Svetlana Boym, 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents', *The Hedgehog Review* 7 (Summer 2007), pp. 7-18, p. 7; Roberta Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 2001), p. 1.

¹⁰ It is worth noting here that poets who declare their love and celebrate it in their poems were punished by not marrying their beloved and oftentimes ousted by their tribes.

the British ‘built Baghdad’ while Americans, who in destroying the regime destroyed the whole country, ‘reduced large swathes of Baghdad to rubble’.¹¹ The dangers besetting the trip and the worries of her family have not deterred her from travelling to the country of her origins and seeking peace and reconciliation despite war in an attempt to honour the memory of her grandmother and atone for her long-stifled Iraqi heritage. Benjamin, who has tried hard to hide her Iraqi origin during her university years, realizes as she grows older that it is her duty to help in preserving her Jewish Iraqi legacy, that of remembering and writing the stories of her grandmother, lest they are forgotten.

The past lives of the indigenous Jews of Iraq offer a rich legacy that lasted for thousands of years and has to be recorded. The memoirist has never lived in Iraq, yet she bears the past of her family as an extension of her identity, a ‘second-generation mourner’ of the lost Baghdad.¹² Marianne Hirsch argues that remembering the traumatic past that our parents or grandparents endured can be healing for both those who witness the horrifying events and for their decedents. The pain of losing one’s home, or any other pain for that matter, is transmissible and transformative for second-generation mourners. Benjamin’s remembering and writing about the loss of her ancestral home is made possible by her grandmother’s nostalgic identification with Baghdad and the stories she told about Baghdad, referred to by the author as ‘an Eden before the Fall’ (12). The act of narrating stories is also conjured by family albums, wherein the photo, supposedly stopped at a given time, propels the affective and traumatic for generations to come. The photo is pivotal in recording and validating the truth value of the biographical act.¹³ Benjamin, who is elegizing the loss of Jewish life in Baghdad in addition to mourning the present condition of people in the country, including the handful of Iraqi Jews who remained in the country, validates her account by the inclusion of photos of her family posing in the old Jewish quarters of Baghdad or while picnicking on the banks of the Tigris (13).¹⁴

¹¹ Marina Benjamin, *Last Days in Babylon: The Story of the Jews in Baghdad* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. xx, p. xxi. Referred to hereafter in the text as *Last Days*. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹² Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 106.

¹³ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames, Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 5-8.

¹⁴ One of the most important photographs according to the author is that of her grandmother when she first married. The photo, featuring Regina, the author’s grandmother in black *abaya* (chador) on the Tigris’ banks, reads as ‘a silent rebuke, reminding me [i.e. Benjamin] that for too long I was never much interested in my grandmother’s life’ (pp. 12-13).

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Last Days chronicles the history of Benjamin's family in Baghdad alongside that of the Jewish community. She stops at major turning points in their modern history, namely the 'Farhud'¹⁵ (the killing of Jews, also known as pogrom) of 1941 and the 'Taskeet'¹⁶ (forfeiting Iraqi citizenship and going to Israel) almost a decade later. The killing of around two hundred Jews and many more Muslims during the Farhud and the mass departure of Iraqi Jews to Israel after much social and political unrest, or what came to be known as the Taskeet, led up to the tragic dwindling of their ancient and rich culture. The author reminds her readers that Jews lived in Mesopotamia for 'more than 1,000 years' before the Islamic armies' arrival and prospered in the land only to be uprooted by terror unleashed against them after the arrival of many European Jews in Palestine, the Declaration of Balfour, and the creation of Israel in 1948, which caused, and is still causing, decades of war between Israel and the Palestinians (xvii). She underlines that violence against the Jews in Baghdad is a relatively recent phenomenon that started with colonial presence and Zionism, unlike their systematic persecution in Europe throughout history.

The Prologue articulates the author's intentions, that is: the dramatization of her grandmother's life as an extension of the once thriving Jewish community. The text as a whole revives her grandmother and mother's memories about the Mahalla, the old Jewish quarter, the teeming streets, the bustling souks and ancient synagogues and posits them against the frightened handful of Jews still living in Baghdad, a defeated and mutilated city. The Jews there are struggling against 'persecution, war, sanctions' and the uncertainty of Iraq's future (228). This destiny, as the composition uncovers, is shared by all Iraqis, including Jews. Recovering the past amidst war can be both urgent and transformative for the narrator whose personal account

¹⁵ The killing of the Jews was called 'farhud', see *Last Days*, p. 142. For a more elaborated discussion of the historical events see Mark R. Cohen, 'Historical Memory and History in the Memoirs of Iraqi Jews', in *Ot LeTova: Essays in Honor of Professor Tova Rosen*, ed. by Eli Yassif et al. (Beer Sheva: Dvir, 2012), pp. 110-137.
<https://www.academia.edu/37423208/Mark_R._Cohen_History_and_Historical_Memory_in_the_Memoirs_of_Iraqi_Jews_in_Eli_Yassif_et_al._eds._Ot_LeTova_Essays_in_Honor_of_Professor_Tova_Rose> [accessed 3 February 2020].

¹⁶ For further information on the mass immigration of Iraqi Jews, see Lital Levy, 'Self and the City: Literary Representations of Jewish Baghdad,' *Prooftexts* 26 (2006), pp. 163-211. Benjamin refers to Taskeet on p. 228 and to the events that led up to it throughout her book.

incorporates the collective memory of the community as it faces erasure. The narrative centres on Regina, the grandmother, who was born in 1905 to a wealthy Jewish family in Baghdad, and whose life parallels the history of modern Iraq, under Ottoman and British rule. Regina's account, chronicled by the author, is rendered in its minute details, the pieces are put together through the memories of many of her family members and family albums. Notwithstanding the fact that Regina lived in a different time, Benjamin's account about Iraq in the past is an act of preservation against the colonial grip; it is an attempt by the colonized subject to unsettle the American hegemony and voice its brutal and devastating presence in Iraq.

The power of literature to evoke the past in the present through the senses is elaborated in Marcel's Proust masterpiece, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-27), where the dipped madeleine in the lime tea is a metonym for happy childhood and maternal love. The Proustian vein underpins Benjamin's recollection of her grandmother and the depiction of Baghdad during the first part of the twentieth century, the Baghdad her grandmother knew. In remembering the past, Benjamin analogizes memories to 'visceral snapshots', and in so doing foregrounds the necessity of the sensory in the remembering process (7). This is echoed in the first chapter of *Last Days*, where Benjamin's memories materialize in the smell of 'sharp notes of coriander and cumin', the taste of Baklava, the healing power of hot soup, and the sound of Regina's loud laughs (3). Middle Eastern food, just like the madeleine and the lime tea, triggers a train of associations that not only transcends the ugliness of the present moment but also obliterates the pain of a crippled Iraq and the suffering of its inhabitants. Rashid Street, Souk al-Serai, and the banks of Tigris, for example, are sites of memory as far as the past of her grandmother is concerned. She recalls the shops where her mother bought her first dress, where her grandfather had his warehouse, and where her grandparents used to live. The photograph of Rashid Street in 2004 swarming with people, in the Prologue, is an indication that old Baghdad stands defiant amid the American occupation and the devastation of war. The Shorja, which Benjamin tells us used to be the Jewish Quarter's largest open-air souk, still stands in its original place, enduring the tests of time, unchanged and unyielding (xxiii). The 2004 visit to old Baghdad is a journey into her grandmother's world whereby the author operates as a vessel to channel Regina's memories and bring them to the present.

Last Days comes quite close to an epic elegy where mourning for the loss of Jewish homes and peaceful life features as a lingering grief shared by the exiled Jewish

community in London and the current Iraqi landscape. The text elegizes both the people and their city by foregrounding abiding identification between Baghdad and its grisly legacy of pain and suffering, inherited by both its scattered people and colonized inhabitants. Benjamin remembers her grandmother's gathering with Iraqi friends who, just like her, have fled Iraq and come to London to start a new life. Regina and her kids have endured daunting prejudices and economic hardships, as well as the numbing cold, depressing fog, and 'England's legendary biting winds' (10). On her arrival, Regina has tried to reach out to her English landlady by talking about her past life in Baghdad and by introducing herself to neighbours, but fails to make English friends. When she realizes that the city, its weather, and its people are not interested in her story nor in her friendship, Regina, a single mother of three, cocoons in her past and survives isolation by creating her own Baghdad in London.

Last Days goes to great lengths to describe in detail the gatherings Regina holds with expats like herself where Arabic music is played, Baghdadi food is served, and gossip about the Iraqi-Jewish community is exchanged. These getting-together scenes of Regina and her friends have stayed in the author's mind and are propelled to the surface when she decides to write a book about Iraq. While touring Baghdad, Benjamin draws a nostalgic map that takes her back to childhood memories that are shaped by Regina's stories about Baghdad. The minute rendering of those gathering in her grandmother's sitting room in London establish the symbolic association of material activities such as eating Baklava and listening to Arabic music, and surviving the trauma of dislocation and diaspora. Immigrants' close community ties during the fifties in London are underlined in the text in order to underscore their vital importance in sustaining both the alienated individual and highlighting the survival instinct of minority groups, struggling against racism and the elements (the symbolic use of weather is crucial in foregrounding the contrast between the warmth and love of Iraq and the coldness and cruelty of England).

The heaviest of all burdens for wealthy Jewish Iraqi, like Regina, is the loss of status when leaving home and racism when immigrating to and living in a predominately white country after the Second World War. The manifestations of racism and hostility, even when they are not openly carried out, are felt and lived in 'the indifference and casual disregard' of people (10). The trauma of immigration, inherited by Benjamin's family, constitutes a major part of their heritage as second-generation mourners and serves as a constant reminder of the vulnerability of the

immigrant status and the pernicious effects of racism, an enduring legacy immigrants and minorities have to live with. Immigrants, such as Regina, are dislocated culturally and displaced economically. In losing their privileges and social status as a result of moving from a rich middle-class suburb on the banks of Tigris to a poor working-class area in London, they find themselves the target of racism, or, at the very least, social rejection. Her grandmother's memories of the trauma of exile and its long-lasting effect are cross-generational: the share of pain re-enacts memories of diasporic narratives, articulating estrangement and uprootedness. The author's flashbacks to her grandmother's sitting-room scenes and her work as a shop assistant create specific images of a remote yet vivid past. By drawing on the empowering emotional affinities with Regina, the author's insights into her grandmother's life help to clarify how the written text registers the mundane as the essence of what it means to lose a home and a country. Underscoring the dialogical relationship between remembering and forgetting, and the writer's constant need to look for images to solidify the evasive past denotes the power of words to strike a chord, connecting time with places, emotions with things.

What kept Regina afloat in London during the late fifties is the 'tack[ing] up on nostalgia and bonhomie' (10). Nostalgia, as an act of remembering and reliving past joys, becomes an act of survival for the Jewish diaspora, by helping them to mitigate the pain and attenuating isolation through family and communal support. In his article 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*' (1989), Pierre Nora argues that Jewish memory exemplifies the interconnectedness of personal memory, collective remembering, and history in the life and continuity of a nation. His theories on the *lieux* and *milieux de mémoire* uncover the ebb and flow of both collective and personal memory as components of identity and national history. Memory for him is synonymous with life, in constant movement and evolution, while history, an attempt to reconstruct life, is 'always problematic and incomplete'.¹⁷ In other words, memory is life, transient and fluid, whereas history is an attempt to capture life from one perspective in order to restore/claim it. Though complex, multiple, and individually claimed, memory belongs to the community and takes the shape and colour of its people. Unless connected to space and solidified in acts of life, memory is consumed by history and dies.

¹⁷ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,' *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 7-24; p. 7.

The interplay of memory and history coalesces the nostalgic act of identification and belonging in *Last Days*, which exemplifies to an extent how the thriving past of Jewish communities in the Middle East, though still graspable within the living memories of some Jews and Muslims who lived during that time, is for today's readers so remote as to be almost fantastic. While stressing the lost world of Baghdadi Jews and their legacy, an account of better times, prosperous trade, and religious coexistence, the current scenes of utter violence that permeate the text undermine the nostalgic narrative. Yet the author's focus on the Iraqi society before the introduction of Zionism and colonialism, two processes that caused damage to the land and severed the ties of its people, is intrinsically bound with Western intervention in the Middle East:

After almost a century of Arab-Zionist conflict, it is difficult for those with no direct experience of the Middle East to imagine Jews like my great-grandfather as a vital presence in Muslim societies and culture, or at least to appreciate the extent to which Arab Jews lived in peaceful co-existence with the rest of the Arab world. (20)

The division between Mizrahi/Sephardi (Jews from Arab descent) and Ashkenazi (Jews from European descent) is more pronounced in the life of Arab Jewish immigrants in Israel. *Last Days* depicts how Iraqi Jews are housed in camps on their arrival and are introduced to their new environment by being taught a new language and trained to embrace Zionist ideals, brought by European Jews. This helps in the process of their integration in Israel, which is based in part on understanding the boundaries between Jewishness and Arabness.¹⁸ Benjamin states that Western Jews 'knew nothing about Eastern Jewry'; they see them as Orientals in need for Western help and charity and a medium for achieving their dream to establish a homeland in Palestine (153). Benjamin underlines this point in order to show how division within the social order of societies can lead to racial tension, rifts, and wars. Zionism as a European ideological product and its dream to establish 'Eretz Israel'¹⁹ was rejected by Eastern Jews who 'had not experienced any crisis of identity except

¹⁸ Ella Shohat, 'Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims,' *Social Text*, 19/20

(1988), pp. 1-35, p. 25, and Tilde Rosmer, 'Israel's Middle Eastern Jewish Intellectuals: Identity and Discourse,' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 41.1 (2014), pp. 62-78.

¹⁹ Eretz Yisrael or Israel can be used interchangeably to refer to the land of Israel or the Holy Land.

that in the past they had been the object of philanthropy, and were now to become the object of proselytism' (153). Zionist infiltrators plotted terrorist attacks, stirring up religious and racial feuds in an attempt to speed the mass immigration of Arab Jews to Palestine, during and after the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948 (151).²⁰ Yet Israel used racist and inhumane immigration procedures upon Arab Jews by spraying them with DDT, taking their children away, and keeping them in transit camps in the middle of nowhere.²¹

The narrative reflects on the British and American colonial presence in Iraq and their role in alienating minorities and instigating ethnic and religious clashes within the same society. British colonial legacy is still carried out by Americans in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. Their agenda was, and still is, to create spheres of influence in order to rule through division and chaos; the same tactic informs American policies on the ground in the Middle East. Imperial policies in the region resulted in the birth of many radical movements. Arab nationalism, for instance, reacted to imperial presence and gained momentum after the establishment of Israel on Arab Palestinian lands in 1948. Islamism or Islamic resistance to colonial presence after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime can be seen as a reaction against American colonialism, the division of the country, and the corruption of successive governments, many of them supported by the USA and its allies.²² Benjamin's account of Iraq during her grandmother's time—contemporaneous with Certitude Bell (1868-1926), famous for drawing the Iraqi's borders in the sand for 'the young Winston Churchill's edification' (xix),²³ and helping to appoint Faisal as king to the newly born

²⁰ Benjamin's narrative of Israeli complicity in the terrorist attacks which led to Iraqi Jews' migration to Israel was common among those same departing Jews. See Moshe Gat, *The Jewish Exodus from Iraq, 1948-1951* (London: Frank Cass, 1997): '[t]he belief that bombs had been thrown by Zionist agents was shared by those Iraqi Jews who has just reached Israel. Those Jews were convinced that the bombs had been thrown in order to expedite their departure' (p. 177); see also, Nancy E. Berg, *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq* (New York: State University of New York, 1996), p. 164.

²¹ Lital Levy states that '[s]ome 120,000 Iraqi Jews immigrated to Israel, where they landed in makeshift "transit" tent camps', p. 171. On this point and the reasons for their departure to Israel, see Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 105-6, pp. 124-26.

²² See *The Creation of Iraq*, ed. by Reeva S. Simon and Eleanor H. Tejirian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 43, Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, p. 37, and Christopher Catherwood, *Churchill's Folly* (New York: Carrol and Graf, 2004), p. 77.

²³ For further information on the role of Bell in the creation of Iraq see, for example, H.V.F Winstone, *Gertrude Bell* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), p. 207.

nation—reveals how colonialism, be it American, Zionist, or British, has always maintained its gains and protected its interest regardless of the human cost.²⁴

The stories of Regina, the author's grandmother, have been an important component of Benjamin's childhood in London. Her decision to go back home is triggered by the death of her grandmother whose life constitutes a large portion of the memoir and serves as a fountainhead of the stories that the composition relies on to narrate the past. The author's visit is a return to the past and a reflection on the present of the country amidst the labyrinth of the region's geopolitics. The memoir sometimes takes the form of a travel account, navigating the complexities of the regional politics and providing readers with a relatively well-researched book on the history of Iraq as a colonized and battered land in the hands of the Turks, the British, and the Americans. According to Benjamin, the American invasion is the worst colonial presence of all, equalled in atrocities only by the Mongols who destroyed Baghdad, burnt its books, and plunged it into centuries of decay (xxi, 44-45). Set against the desolate background of the American invasion and its catastrophic aftermath, *Last Days'* pulse verges towards despair and frustration with the absurdity of killing, bombing, and the metallic ubiquity of death. Yet the narrative mood shifts at such a formidable pace towards nostalgic recollections of Regina's time, when Iraq was part of the Ottoman Empire. Regina's character is delineated alongside the thriving Jewish Quarter in Old Baghdad where she moves around the city's teeming and bustling souks and its posh commercial streets with joy and pride; she is the same woman who dies in London watching from her deathbed the bombing of Baghdad's suburbs and the looting of invaluable treasures from its world-renowned museums, many of the artefacts being sold in black markets and online across the world.²⁵

The memory of Iraq's past is not depicted as an evasive dream or unchecked fantasy. Memory becomes a reality when evoked images from the past surface on the present. Henri Bergson's concept of 'pure duration', a major contribution to modern

²⁴ See for example, the author's account on the riots of 1941 that claimed 200 Jewish lives and many more Muslim lives. Benjamin argues that the British did not help their allies, the Jews, abiding by their oft-used strategy of placating one's enemy rather than helping one's friend (pp. 142-43).

²⁵ See, for example, Richard Hall, 'Inside the hunt for Iraq's looted treasures', *The Independent*, 10 July 2019, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-archaeology-museum-antiquities-looting-a8996676.html>> [accessed 21 September 2020], Robert M. Poole, 'Looting Iraq', *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2008, <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/looting-iraq-16813540/>> [accessed 21 September 2020], and John F. Burns, 'A Nation at War: Looting; Pillagers Strip Iraqi Museum of its Treasures' *The New York Times*, 13 April 2003, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/13/world/a-nation-at-war-looting-pillagers-strip-iraqi-museum-of-its-treasure.html>> [accessed 21 September 2020].

understanding of time and its incorporation in modern and postmodern narratives, can help in understanding how *Last Days* moves in time and space to relate memories through recalling past sensations onto the present.²⁶ In this respect, Benjamin negotiates different time paradigms in an attempt to capture what Bergson calls ‘pure heterogeneity’, which means presenting time without dividing it into blocks and constraining it to temporal limitations of past, present, and future.²⁷ The clock time, measured quantitatively, is set against the personal time where ‘succession of qualitative changes [...] melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines’.²⁸ Compared to ‘notes of a tune’, recollections of past moments become vessels to relive emotions and sensations as part of life in the present. Bergson argues that ‘the more I strive to recall a past pain, the nearer I come to feeling it in reality’, foregrounding the function of perception and sensation in invoking the past as reality.²⁹ Bergson’s notion of pure duration is a defining moment that impacted Marcel Proust who makes the same point when referring to the narrative’s embedded nature, that is: moving from the present to the past and vice versa in order to revive past emotions through the sensory and affective. Proust argues that the pain felt in the past can be re-experienced in the present by remembering through invocation. For him, ‘what we call reality’ is but ‘a certain relationship between these sensations and memories which surround us simultaneously’.³⁰ *Last Days* can be approached along the lines of the Proustian understanding of memory as a nostalgic outpouring of conflicting emotions of pain and pleasure spurred by visiting places that house endearing souvenirs and revived by the sight of objects that capture moments of joy and pain. For instance, Benjamin’s departure to Iraq embodies the functioning of memory in the writing process as a stimulating endeavour to remember the past of her grandmother and mother in Iraq before their dispersal. The timing, just after the end of the major American combat operations that resulted in the destruction of Iraq, is both a blessing and a curse. The sheer scale of devastation hasn’t scarred the old city where the Jewish heritage still lingers, though in ruins. Old Baghdad with its maze of alleys, the Tigris with its enduring presence, and the souks where people move at

²⁶ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone, 1988), p. 104.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³⁰ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Finding Time Again*, trans. by Ian Patterson (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 197.

fascinating paces seem to resist the American invasion: ‘The Old City is one of the few places in Baghdad where you won’t see American soldiers’ (xiii).

Last Days is a narrative of return with a Middle Eastern twist; the interplay of the political in the personal foregrounds the author’s own intent to grapple with why Iraq and its people have to suffer at the hands of foreign invaders. Her focus on the happy memories of her mother and grandmother are her only reassurance as she crosses the desert on her way to Baghdad during the war. In *Home Matters*, Roberta Rubenstein states that home is ‘[n]ot merely a physical structure or a geographical location but always an emotional space’, charged with a feeling of longing and belonging embodying conflicting emotions, evoking at times disassociations and self-loathing as well as pride and self-satisfaction.³¹ The geographical separation is not necessarily a displacement in history, and the narration of personal accounts goes beyond the concept of history as an academic study of past events, or the truth value of what really happened before. According to Rubenstein, nostalgia is more temporal while homesickness is more spatial and geographical.³² Yet, both homesickness and nostalgia overlap in the writing process and the unpacking of the author’s heavy emotional burden. Visiting Iraq after the death of Regina and her reconciliation with her Iraqi-Jewish heritage become dauntingly complex within the colonized landscape.

The text portrays American colonialism as an evil force of destruction and in so doing dislodges much of the Western media’s coverage of the war, naively presented as a liberating movement or a people’s revolution against the tyranny of a despot. Benjamin is sceptical about what Western channels present as the euphoric outpouring of masses against the regime and shows that the famous toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein is a staged event (242). Some of the Western viewers, though public opinion was against the war on Iraq, are led to believe that the war is fought for democracy and freedom. Bearing witness to disappearing histories of past thriving communities, bustling villages and towns is a serious attempt to re-write the history of Iraq from new perspectives. Memory in literature is at times a metonym for history and loss while elsewhere attempting to resist and/or struggle to exist against hegemony and its thundering discourse. The authenticity of literature, unlike that of history, is the fictionalization of the real whereby cataclysmic events, such the Nakba, the Holocaust, the ongoing war in Yemen, Syria, Libya, or Iraq, are dramatized as they

³¹ Rubenstein, p. 1.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

impact people and trigger them to remember as a collective group in order to outgrow their loss and heal their wounds. To remember is oftentimes to survive.

Last Days chronicles the life of Iraqi Jews through the lens of an émigré daughter living in Britain. By drawing on her mother's and grandmother's memories of Baghdad during the Ottoman, British, and American colonial presence, the text foregrounds the tragedies of Iraqis by focusing on the Jews' dispersion as well as that of others. The disintegration of the social fabric and the severing of blood ties is the direct result of continuous colonial intervention and its meddling in Iraqi affairs. This article has explored nostalgia as a yearning for the past amidst the ruins of the present by underlining the interplay of colonialism and wars, and sectarian violence. Anti-Jewish violence in Iraq has no historical roots but is the result of colonial policies of racial division, religious provocation, and the spewing of poisonous propaganda, namely after the declaration of Balfour, and the establishment of Israel.³³

Regina, the centre of the narrative, witnesses all the major events, namely the attacks against the Mahalla, the Jewish quarter, and its devastating aftermath. *Last Days* contains within its folds the biography of Regina, her mother, and her daughter. Their lives are interlaced with episodes and stories of the author's own life in London and her trip in Iraq where the space still preserves sites of identification and belonging. Many of the events are memories and recollections of a long-gone past, spanning the lives of three women; but the authorial voice is authentic in its invocation of signposts where memories are aligned with geography. The space she claims as home, though prey to the vagaries of memories, is always checked by the sensory and grounded in the physicality of the land. Thus, the repertoire of stories about Baghdad is a roadmap for navigating the alleys of the old city and tracing the past as a reality.

Because of the peculiarities of their exilic experience, the life narratives of many Middle Eastern Jewish authors are often concerned about the history of their families in the Middle East at times of great turbulent changes such as the recent works from Jean Naggar, Zonana Joyce, and Violette Shamash mentioned earlier. Their works are the closest to history, and in their endeavour to reconstruct past events and stories that happened in the past, they take their readers beyond today's wars to an utterly different world. Benjamin, in this respect, restores from her exile, through the incorporation of a plethora of disciplines, the past of her family and community before

³³ *Iraq's Last Jews: Stories of Daily Life, Upheaval, and Escape from Modern Babylon*, ed. by Tamar Morad, Dennis Shasha, and Robert Shasha, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 79.

they left Iraq. In locating the large part of her narrative in her grandmother's time, the author is intent on touring her readers across a conflict-free Middle East, away from the present of a land steeped in power struggle and bloodshed; much of the text reads like narrative without geography because the woven stories cannot fit in the cartography of Iraq today. The stakes are even higher when the text draws on the memory of the disposed, colonized, or immigrant communities in order to consolidate one's identity and revive one's past. Life narratives become a bulwark against self-annihilation and a vital source of survival for both the writer and her people. In the process of recovering the lost homeland through the truncated memories of its scattered people and the ink of its poets, the act of narrating/witnessing is transformed into an act of preservation in the face of erasure.

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