

Home and Counter-home in André Aciman's *Out of Egypt*¹

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ARTICLE DATA

Received: 30 March 2023

Accepted: 15 June 2023

Volume: 3

Issue: (2) Spring 2023

DOI: 10.54848/bjtll.v3i2.62

KEYWORDS

Alexandrian Jews, diaspora,

exile, home, self-identity,

Andre Aciman, the postmodern

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine the interrelationship between self-identity, home and (Jewish) diaspora as portrayed by André Aciman in *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* (1994). Further, the paper shows why such concepts are easily expressed in the genre of life-writing, especially the memoir, and finally concludes that Aciman's Diaspora, which is communal, Jewish and historical, instead of unmooring his anchors, steeps him in his Jewry. In other words, his identity is exclusively Jewish and Jewry is diasporic in essence and that might make Aciman multi-lingual and multi-national but unchangingly Jewish and diasporic. This conclusion, thus, throws light on the essentially clannish nature of Aciman's experience related in his memoir, in spite of the narrative's representation of diaspora in postmodernist terms.

1. Introduction

My home is a counterhome, and my instincts are counter-instincts André Aciman (*False Papers*, 2000, 140)

“Where are you happiest today?”

“I think probably on an airplane.” (Palestine Remembered, 2021, 0:56)

This paper examines the three interconnected notions of home, exile and identity in André Aciman's *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* (1994). It attempts to define the effect of Aciman's Jewry on his perception of his diasporic fate and his identity. Thus, this paper explores the three notions individually and then relates them to Aciman's text to understand them in light of his memoir. Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's understanding of 'home' as well as Homi Bhabha's "unhomely" are employed here to analyze the influence of the political/public on the private zone of Aciman's home. Further, the theoretical distinctions between (Jewish) diaspora and exile are thoroughly analyzed and Aciman's own essays are used to interpret the interrelationship between identity, diaspora and Jewry as he portrays them in his memoir. Finally, the paper aims to emplace Aciman's memoir within the Judeo-diasporic condition and to understand how he represents it.

In the three critical works: "Out of Egypt, Out of Place: Memory, Exile and Diaspora in André Aciman's and Edward Said's Memoirs" (2015) by Katja Sarkowsky and *The Elsewhere on Belonging at a Near Distance* (2005) by Adam Zachary Newton, and Roger J. Porter's "Autobiography, Exile, Home: The Egyptian Memoirs Of Gini Alhadeff, André Aciman, And Edward Said" (2001), Aciman's memoir is read comparatively with Edward Said's *Out of Place* (1999). Sarkowsky examines the role of memory and narration in both texts on "making sense" of the experience of exile which, in turn, becomes a "narration

¹ This paper is part of an unpublished Ph.D dissertation by the author, entitled: *Identity, Home and Exile in Waguih Ghali's Autobiographical Beer in the Snooker Club and André Aciman's Out of Egypt: A Memoir*, 2018.

of self” (p.50). Newton examines how the place from which the authors get exiled functions as tropes for both writers: they both “retrospectively make up Palestine and Egypt . . . metaphorically— a place invented, mirroring, on spec, standing beyond time” (p.235). Likewise, Porter examines how these “exilic writers represent their sense of displacement . . . and make literary capital out of their loss” (p.304) of home. *Out of Egypt* has also been contextualized by Perri Giovannucci with his contemporaneous Edward Said, Nawal El-Saadawy and Al-Hadeff. In Giovannucci’s *Literature and Development in North Africa: The Modernizing Mission* (2008), Aciman’s work is described as unravelling the truth about Egypt: “his essays and autobiography have done much to chronicle recent Egyptian history and to contextualize it for an American understanding” (p. 122). Instead of reading Aciman’s memoir as it should, essentially based on memory and a metaphoric recreation of events, he takes Aciman’s account more seriously as a chronicle of Nasser’s Egypt.

As is clear from the above review of literature on Aciman’s *Out of Egypt*, this memoir has always been studied in relation to other texts, namely, Said’s *Out of Place*, to get a more comprehensive understanding of the historical context or the literary representations of such themes as exile and home. Although this paper also examines home and exile and their repercussions on self-identity, it attempts to provide a close reading of the text to focus on the rich multi-layeredness of Aciman’s memoir. This zooming in on the memoir helps forefront, neither Egypt’s historical juncture, nor any generalized conception of exile, diaspora or the home-in-exile condition. Rather, it tries to understand how Aciman as a diasporic Jew represents his experience to redefine, in postmodern terms, the Jewish diaspora. Therefore, this paper examines the specific intricacies of Aciman’s narrative to get a firm grasp of *his* understanding of Jewish Diaspora, Jewish home and Jewish identity. Quite paradoxically, in spite of Aciman’s postmodern representation of his exilic experience which makes it very relevant to our current postmodern condition, it also leaves us with a very stable and cyclical understanding of the Jewish experience as essentially diasporic and of Jewish home as invariably ‘portable’ (see below p. 4) and textual. Although a ‘portable’ home and a diasporic fate seem, on the surface, to be disjuncting, this Jewish perception of Diaspora gives Diaspora a special meaning and value: it is seen as an uninterrupted thread that holds all Jews together across time and space. Although Aciman’s memoir and essays are all very postmodern in script, they are underwritten by a solid binary opposition of Jew and Gentile. The question thus is: is Aciman only (re)-representing Jewry and engrafting it on the postmodern experience to make it more accessible to himself and the readers, and thus more appealing? Or does his postmodern ‘playfulness’ with space and time concern only one important facet of his life: his sense of home as “unhomely” to use Bhabha’s word? Otherwise, in all other aspects Aciman is so certain of his Jewry and of his diasporic fate and so accepting of them. Therefore, his postmodern condition is itself incomplete and bifurcated.

In *Transformations of the Liminal Self: Configurations of Home and Identity for Muslim Characters in British Postcolonial Fiction* (2011), Alaa Alghamdi argues that stability in a place over a long stretch of time allows the “experiences and practices that emerge within it” to “influence the self-identity of those who live there” (p. 4). Owing to the close relation between home and self-identity, exile—the out-of-home state— directly affects notions of home and self. For individuals who experience exile, self-identity may become fractured and notions of home may become “imaginary” or “desired” (p. 4). Alghamdi further argues that for

subjects who have left or been parted from their original setting, self-identity may become fragmentary, divided between identification with the older and newer setting. Home may become ‘imaginary’ or ‘desired’, if the focus is on a setting and a range of practices no longer accessible to the subject. At the same time, of course, self-identity through the bonding with a sense of home maybe stymied by exclusion or marginalization within one’s new social context and culture. (p. 4)

Traditionally, home is a binary contrast to alienation and unhome. However, for Jacques Lacan the feeling of being 'homed' is never that linear. Rather it is "experienced at most as something missed, it is what Lacan would call 'the never-here,' since 'it is here when I search there; [and] it is there when I am here'" (qtd in Lim, p. xiii). In "The Uncanny", Sigmund Freud (1919) explores the dimensions of the uncanny through resorting to the linguistic examination of the roots and the different shades of meaning of the German words *heimlich/unheimlich*, homely or canny/ unhomely or uncanny. Finally, he shows how *heimlich* is a "word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*" ("p. 201). Thus, Freud argues that

linguistic usage has extended das *Heimliche* ['homely'] into its opposite, das *Unheimliche*; for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand Schelling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light. (p. 217)

In "The World and the Home" (1992), Homi Bhabha chooses 'unhomely' and not homelessness, to describe this existence on the periphery of the world with no stable house of one's own. It is an unhomely experience because his understanding of the unhomely rests on Freud's *unheimlich* where this "prefix 'un' is the token of repression" (p. 147). This repression makes of *heimlich*, home, *unheimlich*, unhomely. Living in a politically fraught house created in the aftermaths of war, displacement and exile is unhomely. In other words, the unhomely registers the "shock of recognition of the world-in- the home, the home-in the-world" (p.141). The unhomely home takes place when the "intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the border between home and world becomes confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (p.141). The unhomely registers the encroachment of the political on the personal. In fact, for Bhabha, the unhomely is a "paradigmatic post-colonial experience" (p.142). For Aciman, his 'Alexandrian' home is in many ways an unhomely post-colonial and post-independence experience as Egypt from which he was expelled was fighting for full independence.

André Aciman, a diasporic Jew born and brought up in "the swinging sixties"² of Egypt in 1951 fails to feel home in Egypt due to the specificity of his Sephardi family tradition which is essentially diasporic and only temporarily imperial³. His Jewish heritage is one of displacement; his family have left or been forced out of so many lands and countries that his home resides in this movement between homes. Thus, his concept of home is "imaginary or desired" as Alghamdi puts it and his self-identity is constantly shifting and its only anchor is Jewry. Interestingly, a memoir is a very suitable medium for the expression of those very personal concepts and it is the medium that Aciman uses. However, the 'unhomeliness' of Aciman's home does not result only from Bhabha's understanding of the postcolonial condition, nor exclusively from Aciman's Jewish diaspora which is, paradoxically, his anchor. His own *representation* of home in postmodernist jargon where home slips into counterhome and stability is replaced by disjunction and discontinuity does much to accentuate this sense of the loss so prominent in the text.

In fact, what characterizes the postmodern, according to Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) is the stand on epistemology (questions on the nature, methods, etc. of knowledge). In a postmodern condition, there is a marked absence of a meta-

² The swinging sixties" is the title May Hawas gives to the collected diaries of Waguih Ghali: *The Diaries of Waguih Ghali: An Egyptian Writer in the Swinging Sixties* (2017).

³ Imperial here refers to the attempts of Aciman's paternal family to align themselves with the imperial English and French cultures and individuals.

discourse— a reference point— where there is “incredulity towards metanarratives (xxiv), hence its diversion from the modern which “legitimizes itself with reference to a metadiscourse ... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative” (xxiii). Further, ontology (questions about the self) is another dimension that characterizes the postmodern condition. In postmodernism, ontology is characterized by ‘indeterminacy’. Thus, both epistemologically and ontologically, postmodernism takes off from no point of reference and, as Matthias Stephan states (2019), “operates without a search for answers” whereas modernism “operates on the assumption of answers” (p.7). Although Aciman presents his concept of home equivocally in postmodern terms, he neither forfeits his grand narrative of Jewish unchanging diasporic identity, nor does he have any doubt about his Jewry which constitutes his being (questions concerning ontology). This firm knowledge about the world and the self makes understanding his home/unhome experience along postmodern lines quite problematic.

At this point it is worth defining diaspora⁴ which generally lends itself to a postmodern representation of home as all anchors become unmoored while in diaspora⁵. Exile and diaspora are often used interchangeably. However, in the Jewish jargon, they carry different connotations. In the "Introduction" to *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity* (2002), Howard Wettstein shows the slight but important difference between the two terms where exile is concomitant with pain, dislocation and unrecoverable loss; it "suggests anguish, forced homelessness, and the sense of things being not as they should be" (p. 2). By contrast, diaspora "does not connote anything so hauntingly negative. Indeed, it is possible to view diaspora in a positive light" (p. 2). John Hawley (2001) traces the development of the word diaspora and shows how "[t]he original use of the term by the Greeks connotes a triumphalist migration/colonization (speiro= to sow; and dia= over) from the point of view of the colonizer/occupier. Notions of civilizational/ masculine superiority underpinned such a use of the term (see Wettstein p. 145).

In "Diaspora and Homeland" (2002), Erich S. Gruen writes that Diaspora can be seen as a liberating force:

Jews require no territorial sanctuary or legitimation. They are “the people of the Book.” Their homeland resides in the text—not just the canonical Scriptures but an array of Jewish writings that help to define the nation and give voice to its sense of identity. Their ‘portable Temple’ serves the purpose. A geographical restoration is therefore superfluous, even subversive. (p.18)

In the Hebraic tradition, therefore, exile/ Diaspora can be differently interpreted as either a promise of freedom (as in the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt and their delivery from slavery at the hands of Moses) or a punishment from God.

Another inferred difference between exile and diaspora is that an individual in exile is a lonely individual, cut off from family, home and country. Diaspora, by contrast, stresses the communal nature of the away-from-home existence. That is why, John Hawley (2001) explains, discussions of diaspora usually entail a "forced migration or something that can be located in a place or a people sharing a particular language, faith, historical experience" (p. 146), hence, discussions of "Irish, Armenian, and Palestinian diasporas but also of Sikh, Kurdish, and Tamil (Sri Lankan) diasporas" (p. 146).

Exile and its variant diaspora are paradoxically connected to nationalism, although they are conflicting poles of feeling and of existence. Timothy Brennan (1999) argues that the global modern world makes the "topics of nationalism and exile unavoidably aware of one another" (p. 62); the relation between the two is a division between “individual and group ... loser and

⁴ when diaspora refers to the collective mass migrations of Jews a capital /D/ is used. Otherwise, a small /d/ is employed.

⁵ According to Nico Israel (2000), in contrast to exile which “tends to imply both a coherent subject or author and a more circumscribed, limited conception of place and home,” diaspora, “maintains a stronger link to minority group solidarity and [is] associated with the intersection of post-coloniality and theories of poststructuralism and postmodernism” (p. 3). As such, “it aims to account for a hybridity or performativity that troubles such notions of cultural dominance, location and identity” (p. 3)

winner ... a mood of rejection and a mood of celebration” (p. 61). This mutual “awareness” of nationalism and exile holds this paper together. The nationalist project in Egypt is a turning point in Aciman’s life as it sounds the death knell for cosmopolitan Egypt that thrived since Mohamed Ali until the ousting of King Farouk in 1952 and the rise of Gamal Abd El-Nasser to power in 1954 with his reverberating calls for Egyptianization, nationalization and Arabism. Quite relevantly, Anthony Marx's *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism* (2003) understands nationalism as construing "cohesion by exclusion" (p. 143), whereby, one ethnic group, one religious sect, etc must be excluded for the rest of the nation to cohere. He studies the case of English nationalism in the eighteenth century and finds that “nationalism was pursued ... with the crutch of religious exclusion cynically orchestrated from above more than it was forced from below” (p. 144). In our text, Egypt secures its gateway to nationalism through the exclusion of anything that might be constructed as “un-egyptian” or “un-Aarb”, which included Jews who became targeted after the creation of Israel in 1948 against the wishes of the Palestinians and the Arabs.

Post-colonial nationalism, which better describes the condition of post-1952 Egypt— developed differently from nationalism in Europe. Post-colonial nationalist movements were not local or insular as nationalist movements were in Europe. Rather, they were in many ways international. Gaber 'Asfour (2010), a famous Egyptian literary critic, maintains that in the post-independent stage, there was “no big difference between the national and the regional” (p. 26, my translation)⁶. In Egypt, for example, Arab nationalism or pan-Arabism came to the fore with the rise of Gamal Abd-El-Nasser to power. Immanuel Wallerstein (2005) explains that "for many people the slogan of the anticolonial revolution was not 'independence' but 'independence and unity'" (p.105). Independence, he explains, would give them sovereignty but unity would give them power to compete on equal terms with the advanced West (p.106), hence the rise of collective post-colonial nationalisms such as Pan-Arabism, African and Islamic nationalisms, etc.

'Asfour zooms in on Arab nationalism and reads it in light of its peculiar cultural and political context as emanating from a flawed episteme of lack of self-knowledge where the Arab self exists only by negating the Western imperial other. The seeds of national consciousness have, ironically, been sown by the Western colonizer in the colonized people. The West propelled something in its antithesis— the East; local revolt against the invading "other" awakened the Egyptian "self". 'Asfour argues that the seeds of trouble of nationalism in the Arab world lie in their moment of inception. Nationalism as a movement in the Arab world is concomitant with the fight for independence from the imperial powers of the West. Thus, Arab nationalism rests on an unbreakable set of dualisms that define the Arab self in absolute contrast to the hated Western colonizer, a process that started with Orabi. This has caused the Arab nationalist movements to be, ironically, so dependent on this constructed ‘other’, thereby losing the centeredness of the Arab self. That is because the national Arab self becomes predicated on “the desire to liberate the self from the necktie collar imposed by the ‘other’ but through the selfsame collar” (' p. 36, my translation). Therefore, instead of the self-sufficient Cartesian conception of the self: “I think therefore, I am”, existence for the Arab self becomes premised on the other: “I am not the ‘other’, therefore I am” (p. 36, my translation). As such “it is a negating cognito that connotes the centrality of the antipode” (p. 36, my translation). Egypt ‘was’ what its enemy ‘was not’. In consequence, "plurality, diversity, variety and contradictions, which constitute the historical essence of this culture, disappear ... and nothing surfaces but the ideological imaginings that affirm, in the end, the subordination which the national culture attempts to eliminate" (p. 37, my

⁶ Gaber 'Asfour's book has not been translated before.

عصفور، جابر. *الهوية الثقافية والنقد الأدبي*. دار الشروق، 2010

translation). Therefore, post-independent nationalist Egypt exiled all ‘foreign’ elements, voices and people⁷. Such an exile profoundly affected, not only their destiny, but also their identity, as in Aciman’s case.

In fact, not only are home, identity, exile and nationalism closely related, but the genre of life-writing provides a suitable space for the relation of the experiences of an exile. Although seemingly personal, a memoir is interested in the self as it relates to others, to the national community, to history and to the world at large. Unlike an autobiography which revolves around revelations about a self-centered author, memoir unravels the political through the personal. True to the spirit of memoirs, Aciman “promote(s) an ‘I’ that is explicitly constituted in the reports of the utterances and proceedings of others” (Lee Quinby p. 299).

Further, Aciman intelligently creates a distance between his consciousness as a growing child and the pre-existing solid constructs and beliefs which condition his family’s perceptions, attitudes and actions. This distance, in turn, detaches Aciman, as a narrator, from his narration and from the characters within it. This technique makes the author sound more objective and more detached.

The distance Aciman creates between himself and his memoir is dictated not only by the nature of the genre he chooses to write in, but also by his position as a Jew in *exile*. Rosemary George (1996) pinpoints “distance” as a hallmark of exile/immigration literature:

Like the *distance* that exile imposes on the writing self, writers of the immigrant genre also view the present in terms of its *distance* from the past and future. This genre ... is marked by a disregard for national schemes, the use of multigenerational cast of characters and a narrative tendency towards repetition and echoes . . . most importantly, the immigrant genre is marked by a curiously *detached* reading of the experience of “homelessness” (p. 171, emphasis is mine)

Throughout Aciman’s memoir, the reader notices this “detached” perception of things and of experiences. This detachment is achieved primarily through the ironical and sarcastic tone of Aciman’s writing and through his use of the experiences of his “multigenerational” family to shed light on his own exilic status.

In fact, by constructing his own memoir upon the narratives, lives and experiences of his relatives and parents, Aciman is able to weave the personal into the familial, the social and the body politic. This distance he creates publicizes or politicizes his narrative—that is, it moves the narrative from the realm of personal life to the public/ political arena. His narrative becomes the narrative of his family and his Alexandrian Jewish community, at large and in turn, gives him authority as a spokesperson for the Jewish experience in Alexandria. At the other end of the spectrum, this strategy makes his narrative exclusively Jewish and his sympathies clannish.

In the self-same authoritative all-knowing voice, Aciman narrates events that had happened before his birth as if he were an eye-witness, detachedly and authoritatively. For example, in the first chapter of his memoir, Aciman narrates in minute detail how his two grandparents “met for the first time in ’44 in a small marketplace in Alexandria” (p. 43) and how their friendship grew from there. He narrates, with equal authority, his parents’ first meeting and how they came to fall in love. He claims he has access to his father’s diary (p. 66) where details about his parents’ unspoken thoughts and secret feelings are written.

⁷ Many Jews were Arab and Egyptian and were not foreign at all. These were the “indigenous Arabic-speaking Rabbinites and Karaites with a Judeo-Arabic culture” (Joel Beinin 3). Aciman beautifully depicts the diversity of the Jews who lived in Egypt in his memoir.

Although Aciman's memoir rests on his tragic exile from Egypt, he still adopts a satirical, and at times humorous, tone which augments this distance between the author and his narrative. Aciman as a child is depicted as possessing a superior consciousness and a growing critical mind that allows him to innocently criticize and to unintentionally poke fun at the adults around him. For example, Aciman, as a child and more so as a narrator, is somehow critical of his Jewish family and its aristocratic flights of extravagance and sense of self-worth. His sarcasm moves him from the role of an active participant and places him in the present tense as a detached observer who can, in retrospect, assess, judge, satirize and make fun.

Aciman's sarcasm also makes him aware of the predicament of Sephardi Jews whose sensibilities and past experiences are not Egyptian but who have come to reside in Egypt, a cosmopolitan country whose local culture is not overwhelming or prominent. It also makes him slightly aware of the injustice done to Arab Jews on the grounds of being Arab. However, there is a clearly missing appreciation of local Egyptian culture; it is for him— as it is for his Sephardi family— foreign, threatening and barbarous, even if it is not widely different from the Sephardi Jewish self. Although the differences between the local/ Egyptian/ Arab and the hegemonic/ Sephardi/ Western are constructed and are not by any means natural, Aciman seems to condone them. The way Aciman is brought up makes him, even if aware of the fragility of those constructed differences, a decidedly anti-local person.

The many episodes related by Aciman in his memoir wherein he uses satire and pokes fun at the presumptuousness of some of the Jews of Alexandria who try to assume Western lineage, have other profound implications. First, Jews are a wandering diasporic people and trying to identify their origins is to fish in troubled waters. Aunt Flora says, "deep inside, we [Jews] know we'll lose everything we own at least twice in our lives," including home (p. 89).⁸ Thus, Jewish attempts at grounding themselves in a nationality seem to be un-Jewish and, at best, pretentious. Second, in diasporic communities, essentialist modes are inapplicable. Binaries between Eastern and Western or solid whole definitions of the self and its roots are simply irrelevant. That is because in Diaspora identity becomes fractured, multifaceted and hybrid. Thus, neither the Princess, his paternal grandmother, who pretends to be western, nor the Saint, who is in fact French but is married to an Arab Jew, is totally Eastern or Western. They smack of all the countries they live in and the cultures that surround them.

The final scene of celebrating Passover in *Out of Egypt* carries within it the essence of Jewish exile. In "Autobiography, Exile, Home" (2001), Roger Porter sums the Passover scene up in the following manner:

The last section of *Out of Egypt* is entitled "The Last Seder," a play of course on "The Last Supper," itself a Passover Seder. This ritual was held on the Aciman family's last night in Egypt before their expulsion. If the Seder traditionally celebrates the Israelites' exodus from Egypt to freedom, the Aciman family's last Alexandrian Seder symbolizes the loss of their freedoms and the bondage of the family's involuntary exile. (p. 302)

I only partially agree with Porter that Seder here promises loneliness and exile into the unknown. In tune with this general atmosphere of forced exile, the tone of narration of this final episode is sad and slow. In spite of this bleakness, the prospective exile is not the end. Rather, it is portrayed as an epiphany. It is on the Seder night, while on the threshold of leaving Egypt, that Aciman comes to the realization that Alexandria and Egypt, after all, mean something to him. He, finally, has a voice and refuses to help read the Haggadah in order to "be the kind [of Jew] who do[es] not celebrate leaving Egypt when it is the last thing [he] want[s] to do" (p. 333). It is a moment of epiphany and rebellion, seldom met in his memoir, where he realizes that

⁸ In her autobiography, Zonana draws clear parallels with Aciman's memoir by starting her narrative with this self-same quote: "Deep inside, we know [Jews] we'll lose everything we own at least twice in our lives" (see p. 5 in *Dream Homes*). Her repetition of the same axiom suggests the deeply engrained belief that Jews are a wandering race.

Egypt is not, as he has always thought, a place to escape from to go 'back' to his imagined western home. In fact, he catches himself "longing for a city, I never knew I loved" (p. 339). The city he refers to is Alexandria, where he feels he belongs, more than to Egypt.

In his *False Papers* (2000), Aciman has a somehow different interpretation of the Passover. For him, it is symbolic of Jewish Diaspora. He writes: "Now, when everyone speaks of Pharaoh at Passover, I think back to my very last Seder in Egypt, on the eve of our departure for Italy in 1965" (p. 109) —a secret celebration for fear of persecution. It reminds him of his

Marrano ancestors . . . under the Spanish Inquisition . . . the first exodus from Egypt? Or maybe the second from Spain? Or the third from Turkey? Or the fourth, when my family members fled Italy just before the Nazis took over? Or were we celebrating the many exoduses that went unrecorded . . . for each one of us is a dislodged citizen of a country that was never really his but that he has learned to long for and cannot forget. (p. 109)

For Aciman, his last celebration of Passover in Alexandria symbolizes the uncannily repetitive dispossession of Jews, their many exoduses, the fact that "Jewish history is repetition, the history of repetition" (p. 110).

Aciman's memoir is, in fact, predicated on his perpetual state of Diaspora which had started long before he was born and that would haunt him and his lineage to doomsday. Aciman lives in 'exile' even before his actual exile from Egypt in 1965. He is more like a wandering Jew who belongs not to a homeland or to a particular language group but to a single defining characteristic: Jewry. Otherwise, he is multi-lingual and multi-national. The linguistic versatility of his family members ranges from French, English, Italian, Spanish to Sephardi, and Arabic; but this latter is reserved to the poorer or culturally 'lower' Arab Jews of the family. It could be safely assumed that this versatility goes back to the fact that Aciman is born into Diaspora where he must function in different languages.

It is interesting to examine how Aciman understands 'home' in this diasporic condition. Aciman does not write about his experience as an exile after the "out of Egypt" period. In his memoir, he writes about his diasporic stage as he is still in Egypt. He calls Egypt by its name and does not refer to it as home. Egypt is only a transitional phase and a temporary home. Based on his family's history and his Jewry, Aciman is in no doubt about its transience. Adam Newton (2005) describes Aciman's family as "provisionally part of Alexandria (only metaphorically, 'of Egypt')" (p. 231). This is the case with Aciman's ancestors who were "provisionally part of Constantinople" (p. 231). His paternal grandmother in *Out of Egypt*, for example, witnessed "nine men in her life lose everything; first, her grandfather, then her father, then her husband, five brothers, and now her son" (p. 304). Aciman's diaspora indeed seems to be a patrimony, and as such, his exile dictates upon him to construct his own narrative upon the narratives of his relatives and parents. By so doing, Aciman relates his diaspora to the Jewish historical diaspora; his story is not to be regarded as a detached story, but a continuation of a tradition.

For Aciman, since his exilic condition is timeless, it is not connected to a place or a particular political condition. The political condition is only an excuse for his perennial state of Diaspora. In other words, alienation is dis severed from a particular nationalist or political agenda or policy. In that sense, it conforms to Aijaz Ahmad's (1992) postmodern understanding of exile as condition of existence where "the idea of belonging is itself seen now as bad faith, a mere 'myth of origins'" (p.129).

As pointed out earlier, notions of 'home' and 'identity' are intertwined and in *Out of Egypt*, Aciman's diasporic home affects how he sees himself. While in Egypt, Aciman, the child, never really feels unconditionally at home and never really knows what nationality he is. He waits for the moment when he will 'return' to France—'home'. When asked by Uncle Isaac about "which country are you a citizen of?" Aciman replies "France of course" (p.172). The fact that neither his parents nor Aciman himself are French and that he has never gone to France throws light on the family discourse that encourages family members to align themselves with the West and also highlights the uprooted and displaced condition of this family in diaspora.

In *Alibis* (2011), Aciman starts out by trying to identify himself but ultimately fails: "I was born in Alexandria, Egypt. But I am not Egyptian. I was born into a Turkish family but I am not Turkish. My family became Italian citizens . . . for years as a child I was under the misguided notion that I was a French boy" (p. 185). If he manages to do anything in his attempt at self-definition, Aciman proves his patrimonial Diaspora. It is an eternal condition. Later, what he so categorically refuses to call home (I am not Egyptian) figures as 'home: "once my family was expelled from Egypt . . . we became homesick for Alexandria (p.188). Aciman believes that exile eats away at identity. In the same essay, he argues that an exile is an alibi where he leaves himself or part of himself elsewhere. The "I is elsewhere". Thus, he declares, "some people have an identity. I have an alibi" (p.192). He resembles the phenomenon of exile to that of amputees who still feel excruciating pain for a part that no longer exists. Aciman, like an amputee, "may not be a body minus an arm . . . I am just the arm doing the work of the entire body " (p. 192).

In *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language and Loss* (2000), Aciman expounds on exile and on how self-identity gets affected by such an experience. For Aciman, "exiles see double, feel double, are double. When exiles see one place they're also seeing—or looking for—another behind it. Everything bears two faces, everything is shifty because everything is mobile" (p.13). Thus the ambivalence of the self in exile is highlighted. That is why in his memoir, Aciman ends on a similar note of multiple existences. Sitting on the beach of Alexandria at night on his last day in this city, he imagines himself the following year remembering the Alexandria of today. Here, Aciman clearly understands his essentially ambivalent Jewish diaspora in postmodern terms.

The identity of Aciman and almost all the other Jews of the memoir seems to be fragmented and unwhole; it is represented as multi-faceted and slippery. For example, Signor Ugo Blumberg Rumania, a family friend, epitomizes this 'slippery' exilic identity. He has had many "stops" in life: he emigrated to Turkey, worked in Palestine, and then resided in Egypt. "Always wary of dangers facing Jews, Signor Ugo and his wife changed their surname [many times, in fact] in the wake of a series of anti-Semitic incidents in Cairo" (p. 179). Later, he "got baptized . . . a precautionary measure" (p. 258). Later still, he "became an Egyptian citizen in the hope of spending his remaining years in Egypt. Even became a Moslim, calls himself Hag Gabalzahri" (p. 210). He is variously described as a "survivor", a "chameleon", an "opportunist," and a "madman," (p. 210). Ugo is somehow similar to Uncle Vili who is a "soldier, salesman, swindler, spy," which is, in fact, the name of the first chapter of *Out of Egypt* which introduces us to the diasporic, multi-faceted nature of the Jewish family of Aciman. Vili, like Ugo, changes his name to the "Anglo-Saxon" Dr. H. M. Spingarn (p. 7). Aciman describes him as a "Turco-Italian-Anglophile-gentrified-Fascist" (p. 7).

In fact, readers tread the path of the unknown when it comes to Aciman's nationality and the personal history of his ancestry. The memoir starts with a labyrinthine record of his family; his family's genealogy and place of origin are epic and mirage-like. He describes how his family, and all Turkish Jews by extension, have become Italian through "shady means" (p. 5) simply by "claiming ancestral ties with Leghorn" (p. 4). His Uncle Vili always craved a lineage: "[he] also knew how to convey that intangible though unmistakable feeling that he had lineage—a provenance so ancient and so distinguished that it transcended such petty distinctions as birthplace, nationality, or religion" (p. 5). Uncle Vili, "the soldier, salesman, spy and swindler," is somehow a graphic caricature of Jewish attempts at securing an identity, a lineage or a sum of money. However, Aciman's identity is not as slippery as Signor Ugo or Uncle Vili appears to be. In fact, neither is Uncle Vili's identity, really. Their identity is essentially Jewish and Jewry is diasporic in essence and that makes Jews multi-lingual and multi-national but unchangingly Jewish and diasporic. They may change religion to sidestep persecution and shift into non-Jewish names for the same reason. However, as Aciman makes clear in *Alibis* (2011), "all Jews have the diaspora branded on them so profoundly that feigning they

are not Jewish is perhaps the surest way for them to discover they are nothing but Jewish” (p. 86). Jewry and diaspora are two sides of the same coin, and they are Aciman’s metanarrative.

Alaa Alghamdi defines individual and social identity as “encompass[ing] collective beliefs and practices that seem intrinsic to the individual or the larger culture” (p.18). Aciman does have deeply embedded beliefs and ritualistic practices as we amply see in his memoir— all the religious rites he carries out. In that sense, his identity is not slippery. However, it could be malleable as far as nationality and language are concerned; he is not tied to one country or one language, but many and none at one and the same time. That is why Aciman claims that Diaspora makes him feel and see double because he is always aware of two homes, two realities, two shores.

In his *False Papers* (2000), Aciman theorizes about his exilic experiences in separate essays. It is, more or less, the theory behind his exilic experience which he recounts in *Out of Egypt*. In "Shadow Cities," Aciman expounds upon the exilic consciousness and how it experiences home. He writes:

I come to Straus Park to remember Alexandria, be it an unreal Alexandria, an Alexandria that does not exist, that I’ve invented, or learned to cultivate in Rome as in Paris, so that in the end the Paris and the Rome I retrieve here are really the shadow of the shadow of Alexandria, versions of Alexandria, the remanence of Alexandria, infusing Straus Park itself now, reminding me of something that is not just elsewhere but that is perhaps more in me than it was ever out there, that it is, after all, perhaps just me, a me that is no less a figment of time than this city is a figment of space. (p. 49)

Thus, for Aciman’s exilic self, the self is all there is. Space and time become slippery and are translated to experiences, the memory of which is what constitutes Aciman and his Alexandria, Strauss Park, etc. Memory substitutes ‘home’. This is a typical post-modern view of the self where reality is not definite or separate from an individual’s consciousness.

In *Alibis* (2011), Aciman as an exile, calls his experiences of those infinite crossings and counter-crossings palintropic: 'Palintropic' means that which 'turns again – which keeps turning,' which loops back or 'turns back on itself' or is 'back-stretched' – a going back to oneself, a flipping back to oneself, a sort of systemic reversement . . . [palintropic] is the seat of nostalgia, perhaps not its origin but certainly its end point. This is my home, my emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual home. (p. 139)

In *Out of Egypt*, during his visit to Aunt Flora in Italy, Aciman has his aunt experience all the feelings of exile he explains in his non-fictional essays on exile. She loses all the trappings of a comfortable life she once enjoyed in Alexandria; now she lives in “an extremely small” Venetian apartment where her bedroom “had all the makings of a sparsely furnished monk’s cell” (p. 83). She too is an epitome of an exile leading a palintropic life where she is a “citizen of two countries but I live in neither ... I don’t even think I know who I am, I know myself the way I might know my neighbor: from across the street. When I am here, I long to be there; when I was there, I longed to be here” (p. 85)

As ‘home’ is central to any discussion of exile/ diaspora and as the two terms connote remoteness from centre, from home, so where does the exile live? When does he stop being an exile? Aciman knows no answer for this. His answer is that once an exile, forever an exile. Born into a diasporic state, Egypt— where he is born and lives for eight years— is still not home. In *Alibis*, Aciman argues that with "exile disappears the very notion of a home, of a name, of a tongue disappears" (p. 190).⁹ The Life of an exile and his home reside in the passage or traffic between one ‘home’ and another, not in one particular place. While

⁹ In *Eight White Nights*, Aciman keeps on referring to life on the other bank and gives it a name. his unnamed narrator calls “life on the other bank. Life as it’s meant to be, not as we end up living it,” a Bellagio moment (54).

in exile, connection to home is lost. Therefore, “home” depends on memory. Memory (the construction and reconstruction of the past), imagination and nostalgia intertwine and create home for the exilic Aciman. In fact, for the autobiography of an exile, memory, that is imaginative remembering, is doubly important because it constitutes home. Roger Porter rightly argues that for Aciman, home “become[s] transformed beyond recognition, is unavailable . . . [he] turns to memory as compensation for loss and a source of renewed self-knowledge” (p. 302).

Memory becomes home in Aciman’s memoir where, for example, Aunt Flora has “chosen to live in Venice for the sole reason that she “can always smell the sea” “because there are mornings when I wake up and think the clock is turned back and I’m on the Corniche again” (p. 81). In *False Papers*, remembrance, for Aciman, is more than a mere recollection; for an exile, “remembrance becomes recovery” (p. 11). By remembering Alexandria, Aunt Flora recovers Alexandria. Aciman writes that he loves the sea “in part a result of having lost Alexandria. . . I love it precisely because it was lost” (p. 28-9). Aciman reiterates the idea that love comes with or after loss. This could be nostalgia, nostalgia for childhood and for a lost home: “with the sea around me, I begin to rebuild my life, put things back together again, pick up where I left off” (p. 30). But he does not love the sea itself, just the promise of the sea, “the way I like the promise of Paris more than Paris itself” (p. 32). As an exile, he loves it “from across the street” (p. 31). Once he sees the sea (of Alexandria) he starts comparing it to other seas (of Rome and of East Hampton) because as an exile, he always “sees double and feels double” (p. 36).

According to Aciman, home could be more conveniently a spiritual bond, rather than a place. In Aciman’s *call me by your name: a novel* (2007), Elio defines home as a strong spiritual bond between fellow Jews that becomes so binding that it becomes home; home is spiritual rather than physical. He writes that this Jewish circle of friends:

half ghetto . . . in an otherwise cruel and unflinching world where fuddling around strangers suddenly stops, where we misread no one and no one misjudges us, where one person simply knows the other and knows him so thoroughly that to be taken away from such intimacy is galut, the Hebrew word for exile and dispersal (p.80).

Thus, home is a state of being and is ‘portable’.

Similarly, in her *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* (2008), the Jewish Lucette Lagnado who lived in Egypt writes that being an outsider is her norm as a diasporic person:

In Egypt, I was called a foreigner because of my inability to speak Arabic, in France, where we would briefly sojourn, and where I was completely fluent in the language, I was a foreigner, because I was from Egypt. And in America, I was still a foreigner, because I came from Cairo and Paris. My destiny seemed preordained: I was to be the perennial outsider: a hawagaya, no matter where I lived in the world. (p. 116)

This incoherent, multiple and dovetailed identity of a diasporic Jew is reflected in the non-linear narration of Aciman’s *Out of Egypt*. In Aciman’s text, the unraveling of the writing self does not follow a coherent chronological time frame. Rather, abrupt fast forwards and flash backs knock readers off and confuses them as much as the writing self is itself confused. This could be in keeping with Aciman’s postmodern concept of the exile’s ‘arbitrage’ expounded in “Rue Delta” (2008). Aciman writes that “the present is an arbitrary fulcrum in time . . . and frequently, what we look forward to is not the future but the past restored” (p.193). The past, present and future of the remembering self of the exile are not so categorically separated. In “Arbitrage,” Aciman uses the word “arbitrage” to convey this traffic between the three time zones: the present could be experienced as a memory from a future standpoint. The episode in the memoir where Aciman sits on the beach of Alexandria and imagines himself remembering this moment the following year explains his concept of arbitrage where the present could be experienced from an imagined future point as a memory.

P. J. Eakin (2008) explains that arbitrage is a “characteristic feature of a romantic sensibility” (p. 163) and is more like a circuit “connecting present with past and future” (p.163). More importantly, the “target of the poet’s recall is not ‘the past’ but self— self performing the act of recall (p. 163). Aciman adds that “when committing an act of arbitrage” (p.163), he, like Wordsworth before, him is “remembering remembering” (qtd in Eakin, p.152). Remembering is essential because it grounds the person to his past, cements him to his future as he is experiencing the fleeting present. The slippery experience of time is inescapable.

In keeping with the very postmodern concepts of arbitrage and the fluidity of time, Aciman’s narrative has abrupt fast-forwards or weird unravelling of life before Aciman was even conceived. He starts at the very beginning with his family’s pre-ordained Diaspora, with Uncle Vili who stands for a Diasporic Jew who rides the wave to make the best of his situation, and with his parents’ courtship. After starting with his “pre-natal” life, Aciman, in “Taffi-Al-Nur”, relates the sense of togetherness which he felt, paradoxically, during the black-outs of the Tripartite aggression on Egypt due to the gathering of all the Acimans in his great grandmother’s sumptuous and big house. His paradoxical understanding of Diaspora as propounding cohesion among its Jewish children is portrayed when in times of danger, his extended family cuddle together in fear of persecution and in expectancy of an approaching diaspora. Aciman relates how “weeks before the battle of El-Alamein, the matriarch decided to put into effect an old family expedient. She summoned all members of her family to her large apartment for as long as the situation warranted. None declined the offer” (p. 24) and they came and would come on three subsequent occasions, “like Noah’s beasts, in twos and fours,” (p. 24) a moment of unity that always precedes dispersion. Thus, it is befitting that he writes in English, a global language, to be accessible to his wandering race and to the western world at large which he now lives in.

Conversely, in his memoir, Aciman also traces how slowly but surely every one of his family had to leave Egypt. Then, there is a flash forward to twenty years later in France where his grandmother and Aunt Elsa live alone in a “glorified maid’s room” (p. 208). This does not only contrast the plenitude of the Acimans’ of Alexandria with their pauper’s condition in France, it also taps on the never-ending exilic condition of the Jewish family. Even though in each other’s company in Alexandria, the Acimans feel insecure and about to be expelled. Likewise, in France, they live the consequences of living in Diaspora, losing everything they once owned, living in poverty. Aciman’s narrative, thus, fluctuates in time. Aciman’s unchronological storyline serves to unify the character’s underlying sensation of exile, despite the gap in years and in space. It is an exercise of arbitrage in writing par excellence where one memory leads on to another memory in a different time bracket. But the arbitrage here, instead of pinpointing a postmodern fluidity of time, highlights the continuity of the Diasporic condition of Aciman and his family across time.

As is evident from the above, Aciman’s diasporic condition affects his self-identity and in turn, affects how he relates to Egypt, ‘home,’ politically, linguistically and culturally, as well. Robert Mabro (2002) rightly argues that Aciman’s family, “like many non-Egyptian Alexandrians, but more than most, was always, never really in it” (p. 252). The book is “disturbing” for him because there is “something unkind behind the apparent empathy, something slightly poisonous behind the charm and the irony” (p. 252). Aciman rightly argues in his “Introduction” to Yitzhak Gormezano Goren *Alexandrian Summer* (2015) that Alexandria provided “a way of life ... what came after Egypt was fantasy and fear” (p.ix). In Aciman’s case, the fantasy was that he was French and the fear is of having to change this “way of life”. Thus, Aciman and his family’s relation to Alexandria was one of enjoying the way of life Alexandria provided but it never went as far as appreciating the local culture of Alexandria or Egypt.

In fact, the attitude of Aciman's paternal family towards local Egyptians, in the memoir, resembles an imperial haughty attitude more than an open cosmopolitan co-existence. There is a high wall created between Sephardi (Westernized) Jews and the local population, including Arab Jews. Aciman clearly portrays it in the tense relations between his paternal Sephardi family and his Arab maternal family. In more than one occasion, local/ Arab traditions, carried out by Aciman's mother, are derided by the Sephardi 'Princess'. For example, Hilba is considered a local drink which Egyptians use and which "make[s] their bodies exude what Europeans considered a repellent, dirty odour. My father called it une odeur d'arabe ..." (p. 194). Hilba is portrayed as especially repellent, reminiscent of "the dark, sinister underside of Arab Hygiene" (p. 105) and it is not limited to homes; it travels with the ethnic person wherever he goes. So Hilba becomes, not just a staple ethnic food ingredient, but a Cain's mark of 'Arab' backwardness and uncleanness.

Aciman's home— due to his mother's Arab side of the family and her deafness— becomes the meeting point of the less fortunate and the outcast. It is turned by his deaf half-Arab mother into an "asylum", a "bestiary" (p.108): "there is always a deformed person roaming about" (p.108). But this meeting point is not a haven for them; they are not safe from disdainful looks and remarks there. This long episode in Aciman's memoir tackling the different deformed servants of the house, though related in a light-hearted manner, leaves the reader with an after-thought that couples Arabness with deformity, not without a tinge of sympathy for them, especially for Aciman's mother who has to bear with biting remarks from her mother-in-law and her husband about her deafness and her Arabness. For example, her husband insolently tells her, "I don't want him [Aciman] growing up thinking he is either deaf or an Arab" (p.103).

Aciman shows us, simultaneously, the negative impact of this local "deformed" way of bringing him up which makes his speech "deviant" (p.102) and the rude and nasty ways of his paternal family towards his deaf Arab mother. Aciman succeeds in portraying this double awareness of the downsides of both his Arab Jewish side and his Sephardi westernized side. True to an exile, he 'sees double and feels double' and this allows him to portray 'the Princess' as full of void pretensions and of stinginess. For example, his two grandmothers are best friends but there is a 'big' difference between them. His paternal grandmother cannot invite his maternal grandmother, the Saint, for the 'sin' of being married to an Arab: "Arab Jews had not even been considered as possible guests" for the sumptuous festivity (p.133).¹⁰

Ironically, the Princess, in spite of her westernized sensibilities, habits and demeanour, is Turkish to the core; when she answers the call of nature, for example, she "squats no better than a washerwoman". She "can do it only the Turkish way" (p.132). In other words, the Princess and her mother are not as western as they would like to be. There is 'stifled' acculturation which they allow to come to light only in the most private of moments. Daniel J. Schroeter (2002) argues that, in Alexandrian cosmopolitanism, there was "lack of assimilation" but that "did not mean the absence of acculturation" (p.160). There was cross-cultural influence but each community at the end of the day kept to its fold: "In most places, Jews spoke Arabic and many of the customs of the Jewish community were similar to those of the Muslims, even though these similarities were almost always denied by both communities" (p. 160).

In all the above-mentioned examples in the memoir, there seems to be a friction, a divide between the local and the global where the local is disdained by virtue of its locality. "When asked to make a little speech to the thirty or so family members" who have gathered to celebrate her centennial, Aciman's great grandmother proudly says that she has "never learned more than

¹⁰ This same attitude of superiority towards the Egyptians or 'Arabs' is evident in Zonana's *Dream Homes*. Zonana relates how "the middle-class Jews in Egypt . . . wanted to distinguish themselves from the Arabs. So . . . they sent their children to French schools . . . French became the preferred language of the middle-class Jews, allowing them to think of themselves as European rather than Arab" (37).

fifty words of Arabic" in the fifty years she has lived in Egypt, which makes "one for every year" as her elder son "snicker[s]" (p.135). The disdain for local language is paramount. It is very ironic that, in Aciman's "Introduction" to Goren's *Alexandrian Summer*, Aciman proudly writes that Alexandria was a

multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-sexual, multi-everything society where Copt, Jew, Muslim, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox lived tolerably well together and where multilingualism was the order of the day ... everyone's sentences were spiced with words and expressions lifted from French, Italian, Arabic, Ladino, Turkish, Greek, English and whatever else came by (p.viii).

This evident pleasure taken in multilingualism is rather diluted in Aciman's memoir and the pride shows itself only while "lifting from" Western languages, homeliness while using Ladino and claustrophobic nationalism or lowly associations while using Arabic. The "Introduction" seems to be Aciman's theory, while his memoir is the practice. This type of Egyptian 'cosmopolitan' setup enjoyed by Aciman's Sephardi family was in no way an anomaly in the 1920s through the 50s of Egypt. In fact, French was the lingua franca and most middle and upper classes sent their children to French or English schools. Derision of Arabic, the local language of the local people of Egypt, was an elitist trend.

The obvious derision of locality and Arabness was not received tolerantly by an emerging nationalist revolution in Egypt. In the same light, Schroeter's stifled model of Jewish acculturation made western/ westernized Jews in the eyes of many Egyptians accomplices with the imperial powers. Because just like imperial masters, Aciman's paternal family look down on Egyptians, use the riches of the country and ascribe it all to themselves; like imperial masters they think that "without us Egypt would still be a desert" (p. 168), but do not realize that even if that statement was true, then it was equally true that without Egypt Aciman's family would not be living as peacefully or as aristocratically as they did in Egypt. In an article entitled "'Take us Back to Egypt': about the Injustice Done by the Leaders of July to Egyptian Jews," Amr Hamzawy (2017), an Egyptian professor of Political Science, writes that

Royal Egypt treated Egyptian Jews as citizens with rights and freedoms equal to other Egyptians ... It never got embroiled in discrimination against them nor did it persecute them in the wake of the Palestinian Catastrophe and the defeat of Egypt and the Arabs in the 1948 War. (my translation)¹¹

Thus, Egypt "welcomingly opened its arms to Jews in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to protect them from persecution in the East and fatal Nazi madness in the West" (Amr Hamzawy, my translation). However, the utterances of Aciman's family do not give enough credit to the role Egypt has played in their protection and financial well-being. They, by contrast, give credit solely to the family's wiles and ability to accommodate.

But here Aciman's family are not imperial masters. They, more precisely, belong to no man's land. They have multiple origins and belong to different cultures, the consequences of which they try to overlook. Thus, they are neither rich European residents of Egypt, nor are they native Egyptians. They are essentially a diasporic community that holds onto itself and disdains the host 'native' country that welcomes them. This attitude bespeaks of a flawed cosmopolitan model that has one gravitating center to which other minor circles aspire to emulate and become part of.

On another note, although the Egyptian political scene is eminently present—the Alamein battle, the 1952 revolution, etc—, Aciman's family are never involved, and their sentiment is one of alignment with the imperial West. Aciman's narrative

¹¹ This newspaper article has not been translated before.

عمرو حمزاوي. "رجعونا مصر.. عن ظلم حكام يوليو لليهود المصريين". الشروق،

<http://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=21072017&id=48806884-e58b-43d5-a63a-5f607b287ff0>

uncovers how his family viewed the soaring nationalist feelings in Egypt, surely from a unilateral viewpoint. Most of his family felt that they were targeted and that their interests would clash with this new nationalist regime. For Uncle Isaac it is "nationalistic clap-trap" (p.164) and the nationalists are "savages" whom he "could have had them flogged and impaled once" (p.164). The general sentiment among the cosmopolitan class of Alexandria is one of longing for the British to "clean this whole mess up for us ..." (p.156) and to silence those "turbaned hooligans" (p.177). The kindest member of his family and the most open to the locals, the Princess, has this to say on Egypt and on the rise of Egyptians to prominence and power, and it is the best that is said by all characters: "chapeau to the new Egypt" (p.80) which enables its citizens to become doctors who "generation ago would have been no better than the boy servant bringing us tea on this balcony" (p.80). Now the doctor who treats the Princess "speaks impeccable French" and has an "office— sumptuous" and "brings me back to life" (p.80). She finalizes her speech by speaking her lack of commitment to Egypt, "I've never loved Egypt, but life has been good here; and almost everyone I love comes to see me at least once a day" (p.80).

Aciman also presents us with an outraged Uncle Isaac who argues against their expulsion from Egypt: "but we are not Israelis," he says (p.178). This statement, however, raises a question. Uncle Isaac defines himself against what he is not. But what is he? He does not go as far as protesting his Egyptianness. Why? Is it because he thinks of himself as a citizen of the Western world? Or is it because he does not feel Egyptian and he, like the rest of his family, has his sympathies with and his sensibility forged by the Allies (majorly Britain and France), who were oppressive colonial rulers of the Middle East?

In this charged political context where an Israeli Zionist enemy was creating a new state on the borders of Egypt and where a World War II was raging, Aciman presents himself as a growing child molested by Egyptian nationalist ideology, fearing Nazi persecution, looking up to England as a saviour, France as home, Israel, though hardly discussed, but is furtively portrayed as a secret love— uncle Vili "listens to the French-language short-wave broadcast from Israel" (p.38) and the "Israeli national anthem" (p.38) before sleeping, "stealthily" and in "shame" (p.39). In any case, in his narrative, Aciman tries not to sound political or to take sides. However, not being able to see the bigger picture is a failure at objectivity. In Aciman's narrative, as in most autobiographies of 'Egyptian' Jews, there is a marked gap in the understanding of Israeli-Egyptian politics and an absolution of Israel of its own monumental share in the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries; there is no mention of the direct impact of the establishment of Israel on the state of the Jews of Egypt and silence reigns in this regard. Instead, Fingers are pointed solely to Egyptian nationalism and nationalists, those "turbaned hooligans" (p.177) who are portrayed as barbaric racists.¹² This reading of Aciman and his family's sentiments towards Egypt feeds into understanding his worldview as, at best, Jew-centred, and his sympathies as clannish.

¹² Of the few Jews who can glimpse through the wider picture of the Middle Eastern Jewish tragedy is Joyce Zonana who in "Next Year in Cairo" writes, I often anger Jewish acquaintances when I declare that my family lost its homeland because of the establishment of the Jewish state. It's an over simplified view of things, I know, but it holds a truth. Middle Eastern Jews lived peacefully in Egypt for generations before European Jews created their state in a place where Palestinians had lived for generations. Zonana here points to Israel, although equivocally, as the culprit. Yitzhak Goren too can see the Egyptian viewpoint: the factors leading to the 1952 revolution were varied, nevertheless [they] were united in their hatred of any privileged stranger, and first and foremost, of the British administration. . . Any reason was good enough for an anti-British and anti-Zionist demonstration, for a spontaneous expression of the resentment felt by Egyptians, who saw themselves as having been cheated for centuries" (p. 131).

However, Aciman's or his family's lack of involvement in politics could be understood in a different light as a gap between the exile and his exilic home. Paul Ilie (1980) lucidly explains this exilic condition where the mind becomes in exile, unable to feel at home within its geographic surroundings. Ilie argues that exile is a

state of mind whose emotions and values respond to separation and severance as conditions in themselves. To live apart is to adhere to values that do not partake in the prevailing values; he who perceives this moral difference and who responds to it emotionally lives in exile. (p. 2)

Thus, the lack of interest in Egypt could be interpreted as the effect of exile on the way the exilic mind functions and relates to its surroundings. Politics serves in his narrative only as a spur to the galloping fate of Jewish Diaspora. Politics does not concern Aciman. However, there remains this insistence, on the part of Aciman's paternal family, on culturally marking themselves off as western.

In conclusion, exile/ diaspora, home and self-identity are inter-related and they find in Aciman's memoir a safe haven for expression. Diaspora defines and shapes Aciman's notion of home and home defines the self. In Aciman's case, Jewish exile is his home and Jewry is the matrix and the reference point to understanding Aciman's identity, life experiences and his 'portable' home. Although Aciman defines home as protean and slippery, his understanding of it is solid and unchanging. There is a divide between the postmodernist representation of his experience of home and his classic epistemological understanding of Jewish home, not as a physical structure, but as a Jewish experience of residing in the holy Scriptures where home is textual. As shown above, this understanding of Jewish diaspora is traditional and even religious. Moreover, it is perceived as a potentially positive and liberating experience which is how Aciman himself deals with it. In fact, it provides Jews, even if they are not practicing or religious, with a reference point, with a sense of belonging to a specifically Jewish cyclical tradition. It sets them apart from the Gentile. Thus, there is in Aciman's narrative a marked gap between, on the one hand, the experience of Diaspora which is essentially jolting and disjuncting and which is understandably expressed in postmodernist terms, and on the other hand, its perception as reinforcing a pattern that gives meaning and shape to the Jewish people. Moreover, there is a parallel gap between the ontological postmodern indeterminacy and Aciman's firm knowledge about his 'being' which is defined by Jewry. He might not have a specific nationality or one mother tongue, but he is unquestionably Jewish and with that all other facets of being become peripheral in importance. This paper, therefore, argues that Aciman's postmodernist representation of his Diaspora in his memoir and his essays is at odds with the postmodern spirit which cuts itself off from all reference points and solid structures to which individuals may lean back on. Aciman employs postmodern jargon and jostling postmodern non-linear narrative techniques for the expression of the very traditional and classic model of Jewish diaspora. His postmodern expression serves to reinstate the Jewish diasporic paradigm. It never questions or attempts to subvert the status quo. It is, perhaps, Aciman's 'playful' attempt at making Jewish Diaspora more accessible to himself and to his readership living in the postmodern era.

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