

Righting and Writing the World by Reflecting on the Past and Documenting the Present: How Displaced Women Heal Through War

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Abstract

Home and gender are key elements of identity. Forced displacement can shape perceptions of home and the self through the trauma of experience and processes of creative healing that women develop and refine in private, as well as shared, spaces. In this autoethnography, I relay my experience of internal displacement in Lebanon upon the Israeli aggressions at the closing months of the year 2024 whilst carefully noting the socio-political context of Lebanon. I draw upon present autoethnographies and stories that I have observed of women in my life. I argue that women have visibly and invisibly shaped history and sustained identities, homes, and relationships, allowing upcoming generations of women to thrive in thorny environments. By writing about home and displacement from a gendered lens, this essay adds a piece to the mosaic of women's stories that have begun to be shared not so far back in history, making every gendered story matter.

Keywords: women, war, displacement, writing, creative expression, healing, Lebanon

Gendered Displacement and the Warped Self in Times of War

Every time I begin to write, and as my fingertips hover on the keyboard or my pen almost touches the paper, my memory spirals backward - not too far back, looking for the right starting point. It was a Monday at the end of October 2024. I was in the middle of my online class on transnationalism and diaspora, ironically, when I heard a consecutive set of booms. I had grown accustomed to the sounds, going from jumping and crouching away beneath my bed to not even flinching. But upon hearing this one, I snapped my laptop shut and searched for my mother whom I found yelling my name. She latched onto

my arm and pulled me to the corridor in the middle of the house, out of breath, falling to her knees out of fright, out of sheer shock.

Another boom while I type, just now. I hear the sound of what seems to be military aircraft, and the house shakes.

Lebanon, historically, is a country molded and shaped by displacement internally, inward, and outward. This continuous flux of internal displacement, immigration, and emigration has greatly impacted Lebanese lives in the public and domestic spaces, creating complex experiences that vary primarily based on gender and socio-economic status (Fawaz, 2014; Khalaf, 2002). The effects of displacement are substantial on all those involved, particularly women who navigate gendered experiences before, during, and after displacement. Women's displacement experiences within a patriarchal Lebanon account for a duality of burdens: those of gender expectations and those of the trauma of displacement, creating unique mental health challenges that deserve attention (Abirafeh, 2017; Joseph, 2000).

Deeply embedded in the Lebanese cultural fabric, women are often put on a pedestal as an everlasting source of nurturing and emotional support for the household (Kandiyoti, 1988). In many cases, this proves to be incredibly assistive to the recipients of this support. For those women, however, unuttered questions arise about their mental and physical well-being (El Hajj, 2023). In the case of displacement, these roles are further expected. Displaced women in Lebanon thus find themselves in precarious situations that force them to succumb to their prescribed roles and responsibilities while simultaneously grappling with physical and mental challenges (Holt, 2010; Das, 2007).

In Lebanon, women, more so than men, suffer from mental health issues that stem from a plethora of triggers and causes (Abirafeh, 2017). Despite mental health challenges being prevalent across the country, addressing or having discussions around mental health remains stigmatized (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008). A clinical diagnosis of depression, for instance, may label the patient as weak or even lacking faith, as though having negative emotions against one's will is forbidden, a paradoxical notion within and in itself. In such a space where a show of vulnerability and transparency is deemed as repulsive weakness, women may suppress their struggles to maintain societal approval (Joseph, 2000; Kandiyoti, 1988). As such, women own, to a large extent, little autonomy and agency in their decisions and choices in comparison to men. Of course, the extent of autonomy and agency varies across communities and socio-economic class. Within a multifactorial suppressing environment, an outlet for self-expression, exploration, and reclaiming one's narrative becomes vital, almost a lifeline (Hartman, 2008; Mahmood, 2005).

Decades after the Israeli occupation of Palestine, a new phase of genocide arises on October 7, 2023, mainly focused on the Gaza Strip. The Israeli aggression on Gaza soon progressed to Lebanon. Battles on the borders between Hezbollah and the Israeli Forces, massacres in Lebanon feigned by Israel as targeted assassinations, continuous airstrikes, and responsive airstrikes – with South Lebanon, Beirut Southern Suburb, Beqaa, as well as other, somewhat more contained, areas in Lebanon having been devastatingly targeted and carpet-bombed – led to a crisis of internal displacement in the country for families that could not or refused to leave Lebanon. The crisis of displacement peaked between September and October of 2024, as the Israeli aggression carpet-bombed and sent airstrikes deep into large Lebanese residential areas in Beirut and Beqaa.

Quicksand or True Belonging?

The definitive boundaries of home are porous, elastic, and blurry. Is a place my home because I happened to be born there? Is it so because it is the land of my ancestors? Or should I consider it home because I happened to be on this side of the border drawn by some powerful European men? It is indeed a tricky question, and labeling a place as your home connotes a sense of loyalty to it, of commitment that implies rigidity.

Growing up, I lived in three to five houses. The reason why I can't confidently say three or five is because my family, as most Lebanese families, is originally from a village but resides in the city, particularly in the outskirts of the capital. We are from Baalbek, the city of the sun, and we live in Beirut, the city of wells. Beirut is where I was born and raised, went to school and university, and had my first job, but all our summers have been spent in our village house from which we had moved a few meters away when I was seven years old. Those summers were too long and dry that each one felt like an entire year on its own, drenched in yellow heat. In the summers, I missed Beirut.

I had not given my farewells to my home in Beirut. Our house was in a red zone, so we assumed there was too low a chance that it would still be standing after the war. I imagined it abandoned, my bookshelves gathering dust, my veils on the hanger ripping due to an airstrike, and black char everywhere. I envisioned this, preparing myself for the worst as if it would soften the blow.

I grew up in Beirut's Southern Suburb and went to my village on some weekends and summers to get away from the city's noise, the engines, the non-stop whirring, the cars, and the motorcycles. When, on most nights, here in Younine in 2024, we sat around the television, anticipating the next airstrike, we braced ourselves for the boom and watched the city burn, my heart aching, longing for the bustling city noise. Even when I decided not to watch the ruins, I couldn't unsee the videos and pictures shown on the television and on every social media platform. The streets I walked to my school for years, the school where I spent more time than I did at home, the spot where I waited for the bus to take me to university, and the places where I shopped for books, clothes, groceries - everything, were all in ruins.

Now we daily expected evacuation alerts from the Israeli Army, posted on X (previously Twitter), of all places, which further fueled our dehumanization in the eyes of the world. Everything seemed surreal, dystopic, and Orwellian. Each and every one of us felt invaded, knowing our every move was being traced and recorded. Big brother was most definitely watching us, and he probably knew what I was writing as I typed here and now at J. J. library, LAU Byblos Campus. A foreign army threatening our city, we watchfully waited for the boom and the fire. Repetitively, excessively, until we became conditioned to this new norm. To this end, I came to believe that we must quickly record and write with irritating detail the events, reactions, and emotions that we were engaging with during those times so that we knew that this was real, that we existed, here and then. That we had and have vibrant thoughts, dreams, and lives. This was what I saw many people doing, writing blog posts and sharing footage of daily activities that were extraordinary in their mundaneness.

Gendered Identities Fragmented Through Displacement and My Subconscious Trying to Save Me

There was a dream on the borderline of nightmares which frequented my headspace for years. *I am in a vehicle; a car, a bus, or a train, and I am never the one driving. The vehicle revs and swerves at the driver's whims, and I am tossed from side to side, unable*

to hold my ground. The dream often ends with me being tossed out of the vehicle from a horrendously high altitude, and as I fall, I am neither able to utter a sound nor awaken to reality; I just fall into another infernal dream. I try to scream out for help, but each time, without fail, I am voiceless. I had this dream throughout my childhood until I turned twenty-one. Here is the interpretation that I have come to believe of this dream: I wanted, desperately, to have complete agency over my choices and my path. In other words, I wanted to drive myself and hold my ground.

Now the dream resurfaces in my mind, overlapping with my new reality as my mother drives the car on this unfamiliar terrain for the very first time, not sure where to go. She had woken me up, frantic and yelling, to pack up since Avechay Adrui posted on X the map of Baalbek city, its surroundings, and the roads that lead to other areas, all colored red, meaning that we had to leave Younin, my village, meaning that I had to move again, indefinitely and unwillingly.

In the circumstances of war, the degree of agency in displacement is null. Most of the families displaced during September and October of 2024, primarily from South Lebanon, reported leaving their homes with the clothes on their backs and dispersed all over the country (Fawaz, 2014; Khalaf, 2002). Entailing grief and a profound sense of loss of the meaning acquired by the physical space that cannot be recreated easily, displacement affects people deeply. The disruption of peace, the forced uprooting, and feeling as a stranger in one's environment are all effects that displacement may have on people who are forced to recognize their identities in new spaces (Holt, 2010; Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008).

Experiencing displacement is heavily intertwined with various factors, namely gender. In the gendered experiences of displacement, the traditional roles of women are either enforced further or disrupted (Kandiyoti, 1988; Joseph, 2000). Additionally, in the post-civil war Lebanese society, some host communities still hold prejudice against other sects. For instance, cases have been reported where displaced families were denied renting a house simply because they had women who wore a veil on their heads or because the neighbors did not want people of another faith to live in close proximity. After these women's homes were toppled to the ground due to the ongoing war, they were faced with multilayered challenges that ranged from having struggles with maintaining their accustomed privacy, as they had to seek refuge in shelters, to being nitpicked as potential neighbors due to what they wear.

The pressure to maintain familial cohesion against the odds and to blend into an uninviting new environment may be harmful for displaced women's overall wellbeing. One of my acquaintances, Leyla, a Lebanese woman in her mid-twenties, first moved from Beirut's Southern Suburb to central Beirut. After moving, even at such perceivably close proximity, she felt that she was uprooted from her home. Losing the privacy she enjoyed at home, being unable to lean into her daily routine and activities as she did at home, her chronic stomach pain was dramatically amplified, making her unable to eat for long periods of time. Leyla had left her home believing – or wanting to believe, that after only a couple of days, she and her family would return home, so she only had a small backpack of the most necessary stuff. However, as the Israeli aggression continued closing in, and the sounds of the airstrikes became more unbearable, she and her mother fled to Iraq by land-travel. Afterward, she kept wondering, “how do you pack your home in a backpack?” Away from home, she sought refuge in writing down her thoughts, her memories,

nostalgia of home, hope of return, and the recurring phrase, “how do you pack your home in a backpack?”

Women (Re)Territorializing Through Creating Text

I have always feared not being able to construct the perfect sentences. I have avoided writing despite my yearning because I feared inadequately articulating my thoughts, or worse, writing them down accurately and potentially proving their possible hollowness and triviality. Another thing that I allow to hinder my writing is the confrontation it forces me to uphold against bitter truths, absurd tragedies, and intense feelings associated with certain memories. I, thus, tend to circle around what I truly want to say. Nevertheless, no matter how hard I try to dodge those thoughts, I am aware that I won't be able to escape them because they have made a home at the back of my head, pulling at my hair too often for me to overcome. My biggest fear is not writing, and so I oscillate between the materialization of my thoughts onto paper and my empty notebooks, a gap only I can close. Writing is a way to prove that I exist, that I have lived. However, this war has distorted how I experience writing as it installed the possibility of losing everything in mere moments. I might lose all of my books and notebooks in which I have inscribed everything that makes me who I am. Still, I am aware that I would fade were I to succumb to this heavy shadow of futility, so I decide to document my experiences, joyous and otherwise, to keep myself from becoming translucent and empty, as formless as a jellyfish.

I have experienced, firsthand, how writing can be cathartic, but my executive paralysis transcends my willpower. I cannot, for the life of me, write anything, and my petty attempts are futile. There is just this awfully high wall that I'm trying to climb. The bricks that compose this wall are my inner critic, isolation, hopelessness, and guilt for not being able to save anyone from the ongoing atrocities. All these bricks hit me with the realization of the hollowness of my words. Trying to understand what the nature of home is, many questions arise on identity, belonging, and exile. Turning space into home and setting roots require a sense of belonging, at the very least, to the place. Creating memories (a temporal aspect of the home) and taking part in a community are part of what defines a home as such. The remaining decisive criterion for the home is whether or not you can anchor your ship there forever, or at least for a substantial amount of time.

Women have devised and constructed a multitude of texts that proliferate in shape. Weaving, writing, cooking, and communicating are all facets of how women, especially in a patriarchal setting, are often forced to navigate their complex emotions, needs, and aspirations. Hence, living in a war zone, experiencing forced displacement, familiarizing too often with the sounds of drones and airstrikes, having to understand, research, and analyze history and politics with the hope to understand why this is happening to us and why it is a recurring horror, are a few of what women in Lebanon have to face on top of the “Lebanese struggle” with patriarchy, the deteriorating economic crisis, sectarian tensions, and an ongoing genocide. The fabric of Lebanon is quite spectacular in the way that it is multilayered, its design archaic and sturdy in some portions of the pattern and modern and malleable in others. Despite this deeply rooted love that most of us Lebanese feel towards our country, we are aware of the diseases this country suffers from – especially as women, who are ridiculously underrepresented in the parliament whose core value lies within its role of representing the Lebanese people. This is one of the grand lists of reasons as to why Lebanese women find refuge in creating texts, tangible and abstract. For future exploration, it is imperative to emphasize the experiences of not just Lebanese

women but also of migrant and refugee communities who have, atop Lebanese women's struggles, various factors that further intensify their suffering and limit their agency, putting them in a protracted state of mere survival, at best.

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