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Sleiman El Hajj

Department of Communication, Arts and Languages at the Lebanese American University

Sleiman El Hajj

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Golgotha, Beirut: A Feminist Memoir of the Port Blast

By Sleiman El Hajj ¹

Abstract

This partly biographical narrative recounts its narrator's first-hand, ground-zero experience of the Beirut Port explosion, one of the largest and most destructive in living memory. As the narrator recollects her mother's distress over the possibility of losing her children post-divorce, and her joy at finally obtaining, after a seven-year legal battle, the annulment of an abusive marriage, Beirut Port explodes. The focus shifts to a memorable encounter with another anguished mother, who, on the heels of the blast, is hysterical and then completely transformed once reunited with her children. The writer of the memoir culled its material through a number of interviews with the narrator who consented to have her story shared in narrative format, so that the resulting creative non/fiction may contribute to the nascent corpus of gendered writing exploring and interrogating, not only the August 4, 2020 national tragedy in Lebanon, but also the patriarchal system facilitating this calamity.

Keywords: Port explosion, Lebanon, August 4 memoirs, Lebanese mothers, patriarchy

August 4, 2020

Golgotha, in Biblical Greek, has long been thought to be the site outside Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified. Golgotha, in Lebanese Arabic, is the chronic Way of the Cross that we have, once again, treaded.

6:05p.m. inside an uber, I am heading back home, my mother on my mind. All I can think of, while wishing the workday over, is her joyful sobbing when, earlier in the afternoon, she voice-texted me sharing that the Maronite Church is finally granting her the annulment she has been fighting for since 2013.

“That’s it, it’s done,” she said in Arabic in between sobs, “there is no turning back.”

Seven years back, my twin brother and I turned 18, and Mom no longer feared our father would, through an improvised legal loophole, usurp custody and forbid her from seeing us—a familiar practice in Lebanon when parents become estranged. Her pleas to the Virgin I have grown up hearing, after every beating, every diatribe she put up with, rather than abscond and lose us, have been finally heard.

Ya ‘adra, ya ‘adra, ya ‘adra.

It has taken seven years for the ecclesiastical courts to grant the divorce, seven years of treading the Golgotha that most women here experience in one way or another. If the plaintiff is a woman, the burden of proof to justify not a divorce, which doesn’t exist in such courts, but an

¹ Sleiman El Hajj is Assistant Professor of Creative and Journalistic Writing in the Department of Communication, Arts and Languages at the Lebanese American University. His research interests include creative nonfiction, gender studies, narrative constructions of home, queer theory, and Middle Eastern literature.

annulment, is onerous and often humiliating. And yet tonight, finally, we are to celebrate the start of a new chapter in all of our lives.

6:07p.m., blanketed in glass shards, all I remember now are my own pleas to the Virgin. *Ya 'adra, ya 'adra, ya 'adra.*

The city is swathed in smoke. As this crucifixion darkness lifts and I step outside the husk that the uber has become, others too, aghast and speechless, are emerging from their vehicles. A woman is running, all covered in blood holding a newborn. I approach her asking if the baby is fine.

“Yes,” she answers, still walking. “I just want to get him out of here.”

My first WhatsApp notification comes in, and the first frenzied phone call. I reassure my mother that I’m unharmed, and then call for help and an ambulance, still thinking that this is small-scale damage. My best friend urges me to evacuate the scene since it might potentially blow up again.

The taxi driver is still checking the damages to his car, and although I ask him to walk with me somewhere safer, he declines.

“This taxi is all I have,” he says.

I carry my two bags and my laptop and start walking wearing sandals. I think to myself, first things first, let’s go to Gemmayze where a Red Cross station is located. Only Gemmayze and Mar Mikhael, contiguous streets home to Beirut’s cosmopolitan and cultural life—the pubs, the restaurants, the art galleries, the bookshops, the French and Ottoman heritage haunts—aren’t there. The storied landmarks of our youth have been effaced, save for the heaps of rubble that repeat themselves everywhere I look. It is only now that I start to realize the enormity of what happened. I hold my breath and refuse to cry.

Lines are alive again and my phone is abuzz with texts and messages from friends and family in Lebanon and abroad. Again, I tell my mother I’m fine, and turn off my phone to come up with a plan. The farther I walk, the more glass crunches under my feet and the more zombie-like people emerge from flipped cars imploring for help.

Fires are everywhere, roads are blocked by the rubble from collapsed buildings, people’s blood combining with dust and body parts to form the chastising smell of the dead and dying.

Blood, bones, plasma.

Blood, bones, plasma.

Blood, bones, plasma.

Motorcycles have been turned into ambulances, injured people of all ages clinging to the drivers. The fortunate to remain alive will later have their wounds sutured with no anesthetic, under flashlight, in the parking lots of hospitals brought too to their knees. Amidst the carnage, the debris, the destruction, the broken glass, a commanding voice rises, gradually, persistently, till, finally, I make sense of what is being said. A man is shouting my way: “Get in with this woman here, she will drive you to the nearest place you’re trying to reach!”

I get into the front seat and look at the driver: a young hysterical mother waiting for a phone call about her children, who are supposedly at the family house near the MTC Touch building, opposite

Golgotha, ground zero. She is driving erratically, her breathing belabored and she keeps repeating the same thing: *Ma bi hemne gher wlede, bade bas wlede ykouno mneh. Ma bi hemne gher wlede, bade bas wlede ykouno mneh. [I just want my children; I just want my children to be okay.]*

I notice a small cross in her car, so I use faith, knowing that it helps, always. “You are a believer, are you not? You love the ‘*adra*, and she abandons no mother who needs her.” At first, my references to the Virgin do little to reassure the woman. Her screams, relentless and raw, drown all the other voices, the demons in my head, and the din outside the car.

Ma bi hemne gher wlede. Ma bi hemne gher wlede. Ma bi hemne gher wlede.

The woman calms down when I mention the ‘*adra* a second time. She asks for my name, looking at me as if she has only just realized I’m in the car. Her husband calls. The children are with him. One has been slightly injured, but they are alive. Once we finally pick them up, I take the wheel, as the kids, scared and shaken, need their mother’s attention. Just like a prestidigitator makes his or her magic work at precisely the right moment, the woman is replaced by her doppelganger.

The overwrought, screaming woman is now perfectly serene, composed and collected, in charge of the situation. She tells me her name is Tina. She coaxes and cajoles her children into calming down, telling them that everything is going to be alright. As we reach her sibling’s house near Badaro, Tina’s words, tenuous as they are, make me forget the rubble and the smoke, the apocalypse that surrounds us, and believe indeed that everything is going to be alright.

In Lebanon, maverick decisions and maudlin self-expression are, in similar measures, poor choices for women. My mother’s inherent sensitivity, much exacerbated by my father’s inveterate drinking and philandering, has proved as traumatizing as her experience of severing the marital ties that, for 26 years, pinioned her to his tenterhooks. In the days and weeks after the blast, despite, or perhaps because of, everything that has transpired, there is an urgency to reminisce, and we spend hours talking, trying to understand.

My mother has done the unthinkable.

She has challenged a man who, on the surface, is a pillar of our community in Beirut: a pious philanthropist who never misses a Sunday service and hosts luncheons for the Bishop and his entourage on major Feast Days. We recollect the different moments of weakness Mom has gone through in her battle to achieve the annulment. At her lowest, even some of her close woman friends and a few of our relatives abandoned us, eschewing the miasma of scandal that might attach to them by association.

In the end, it is only a steadfast handful of testimonies, including mine and my brother’s, and the confluence of medical reports confirming protracted physical and emotional abuse, which mean that the clerical judges could no longer disregard, dismiss or postpone the case.

The politicians and clergymen whose succor is habitually importuned by our groveling citizenry are often too detached to be impressible. Sure enough, though, in the immediate aftermath of the Port Blast, we see them looping to social media and to television channels voicing their outrage at the explosion, exchanging accusations of systemic negligence, and agreeing that the rampant corruption needs to stop. In this country, there is a consensus, throughout our checkered history, that crime is a *fait accompli*, but there is never a criminal.

In retrospect, I find it comforting to think that my faith remains unaffected by our history of pain, that of August 4, and of silence too, growing up in a home that looked polished to our family friends and neighbors, but was broken on the inside. It is not religion per se that may be soul-crushing, but the way this country's men in power and men of the cloth choose to interpret and practice it in our daily lives. But the buck doesn't and shouldn't stop here.

Exactly two months after the blast, on October 4, 2020, I receive a voice note from an unsaved number: "We've been trying to call you for several times now, but no one answers; we just wanted to know if you're okay and doing fine!" This turns out to be Tina, the woman I'd helped. She tells me her kids have asked about me, and that they miss me.

Listening to Tina's message ushers in a combination of exhilaration and relief I have thought no longer conceivable. I'm all-too-aware that healing knows no shortcuts, but the warmth of realizing that even on our Golgotha, we, as Tina did, and as my mother did, can still choose to not entirely let go—to feel able to struggle, to survive—is crucial to recovery.

And so, later, in another Uber, on my way to Tina's home, I am overwhelmed by a sense of determination and of peace, even as Golgotha and its cloying memories remain raw. Perhaps, in time, and with our collective efforts, the more audible our pain, our voices, become, the silence, slow to thaw for so long, will be replaced by our testimonies. These words, our right to write an existence not devoid of dignity, are what may keep us alive.

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ORCID iD

Sleiman El Hajj  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8827-6981>