



RESEARCH PAPER

Dynamics of Reminiscence and the Pilgrimage of Migration in Amin Maalouf's *Rock of Tanios*

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the literal and metaphorical signification of home for migrants. *Rock of Tanios*, a migrant narrative by the Lebanese-French migrant writer Amin Maalouf, is deconstructively analyzed. Migration, in its passage, brings about a confrontation with the traditionally established notions of home, homeland, identity, and the subsequent transformation. The complex relationship between personal and political experiences is underscored to prove that in the evaluation of cultural production at the locus of migration the ideological standpoints on nationalism and nation cannot be easily segregated. For a migrant, home is no longer a unification of experience referring to a nation-state, an architectural construction or a sense of belonging. When memory plays the part of a mediator and makes the present interact with the past, the notion of home is formed, and for those who have to part from their traditional birthplaces, 'home' is no longer something fixed but fluid.

KEYWORDS Home, Identity, Memory, Migration, Nomadism

Introduction

The study is a discussion of how a particular space can serve as a locus of desire for a migrant, particularly a migrant writer. The Levant is taken as a symbol of the migrant's lost home and desire. Migrants are the ones who are deterritorialized. When 'leaving' takes place, they are full of hopes: aspiring to survive and expecting to find and found a life better than the present one. Their quest is for new horizons and new territories. Nevertheless, what follows departure is generally the disillusionment with deterritorialization and the feeling of being stranded and having no possibility of ever returning to their erstwhile lives and homes. The migrants cannot even go back to their previous selves. The only possibility open to them is the chance to get reterritorialized or be nomadic forever. The time which has passed is no more than a futile recollection of a never-found life and of those gods and customs which can never come into existence again.

Keeping in view the concepts of deterritorialization and identity within the migrant's context, this study makes a deconstructive study of Amin Maalouf's Prix Goncourt winning novel *The Rock of Tanios* (1993/1994) and proves how Maalouf's narrative strategies subvert the hegemonic codes of territorialization in a search for identity. The hegemony in Maalouf's case is twofold: belonging to a Christian minority in the Arab world and moving to France as a refugee made him face the Arab as well as the Western territorialization. Born in the Lebanese metropolis Beirut in 1949, speaking Arabic, English and French but choosing to write in French is Amin Maalouf—a migrant from Lebanon settled in France. While working in the category of a journalist based in

Lebanon, he was forced to witness the War breaking out in his country in 1975 and to immigrate as a refugee to the French metropolis Paris along with his family where he has continued living up till now. He was at a battlefield, and declining to take sides had decided to flee. Recalling that experience he says, "During my youth, the idea of moving from Lebanon was unthinkable. Then I began to realize I might have to go, like my grandfather, uncles and others..." (as cited in Jaggi, 2002). Being a prolific writer, Amin Maalouf gives out a special aura by making himself calmly balanced between two homes, various cultural traditions, and two or more languages.

Carving a stone of hope out of the devastated rock of his homeland had for many years remained a disinclination for Maalouf. At last it was in the form of the setting in *The Rock of Tanios* (1993/1994) that Maalouf chose the conflict-ridden Lebanon of the nineteenth century. In narrative it was the time period when the Ottoman Empire was torn between internal strifes and the interpositions as well as the traditional rivalries of Britain and France. But the period is infused with Maalouf's own nostalgia for his childhood before the war. According to him, it was the "very beginning of the cycle of communal clashes in Lebanon which has never stopped. Before that, different communities felt they were part of the same people" (as cited in Jaggi, 2002). And here in the form of 'impure fiction' he incorporates episodes of familial history as well as the origin of the rift between the Protestant and the Catholic.

Theoretical Framework

To write on the literature of migrants is to deliberately enter into an ambiguous territory: here the meanings are not as a matter of course to accord with the words being employed. Abundance of disclaimers and accuracy of denotation and connotation are required. In the present context, 'migration' comes to be a holistic word covering a range of displacement experiences; an exploration of the selected narrative as a migrant text gives aid in illuminating how 'home' can be experienced in so many divergent ways. What home is, how it is created, how it is experienced are the questions which can be best answered by investigating the tales told by those who abandoned their homes. In the literary world, particularly among the postcolonial critics, migrant writing came to be theorized and celebrated in the role of an emblematic locus fit for reviewing in an innovative manner the fixed beliefs about ideological bonds and identities. The impression created by this theorization is that once the migrant is at the newly-arrived destination, her/his links with the marks and signs of national civilization are faded. In this way, migration becomes a process which leads the way to transcend and decentralize all previous significations. However, while the same perception about home is revised in this study through an analysis of the text written by a migrant writer, yet it is also construed here that the conceptualizations about home have been subjected to such an extent of complicatedness as exceeds the straightforward antithesis between origin/home/nation and migration/exile: the example can be given of the evolution in the idea that it is not something predetermined that the change in geographic location would trigger utter estrangement. Hence, the individually different experiences and representations of home are generally offered in the literature produced by migrant authors; and it is this very diversity of experience and expression which renders complexity to the theorization of exoduses.

Migration has been used as a metaphor of movement and displacement in the theories presented by the postcolonial studies. These theories present migration as a site for examining fixity in identity. As 'metaphor' is a word connoting "migration of ideas into images," so the people who leave/exit their homes/cultures and migrate to/enter into other spaces/cultures/nations become "metaphorical beings" (Rushdie, 2010, p. 278).

Deconstruction gives way to reconstruction, and the act of exodus, which causes the social and linguistic displacement and the dismantling of the idea of a particular place called home, transforms into something empowering for the displaced person, enabling her/him to grasp that reality is only an artifact, so much so that the migrant can ultimately withstand any “absolute forms of knowledge” (Rushdie, 2010, p. 280). Exposition to various cultures makes the migrant sure that things are contingent. Homi K. Bhabha (1949-) is similarly convinced that “metaphor, as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the meaning of home and belonging, across the middle passage . . . across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of the nation people” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 139). Bhabha is here alluding to *Imagined Communities* (1983) by Benedict Anderson (1936-2015) where Anderson suggests the idea of nations as collectively imagined by a community of people when they come to imagine themselves as sharing some common attributes in a set form. And it is Bhabha’s faith that only the ones not belonging to any such ‘collectivities’ and living on the verge of imagined communities in the role of migrants and exiles possess the potentiality of re-imagining and re-writing new imagined communities, because they are capable of putting forward visions and insights variant from those of the collectivities.

Considered from this point of view, the migrant becomes the locus of emancipation. At this site, pain and loss come to be less intense and the prerogative of distinct perception is favoured. Postcolonial theory lent a hand to altering the meanings implied in the words ‘migrancy’ and ‘migration’. The postcolonial theory of literature by degrees granted upon ‘migrant’ the figure of a celebrity. The metaphor of migration was adorned as something suggestive of providing exultant substitutes for interpreting cultures. In theoretical terms, migrancy came to be something ubiquitous referring specifically to migration as a condition of human life rather than as an act. Human predicaments of defining and finding a ‘home’, place versus displacement and exile have been the major concerns and dominant themes in postcolonial theory and literature. The preoccupation of postcolonial academics with the theme of migration has its origins in the conviction that “the relationship between narrative and movement takes on a new and qualitatively different significance in the context and aftermath of colonialism” (Smith & Protevi, 2018, p. 242). Postcolonial scholars are particularly interested in migration because they believe that it has the power to elicit reciprocity among distinct societies; the phenomenon is befittingly summed up by Smith when he says that “Fundamental to postcolonial criticism has been the puzzle of how aspects of life and experience in one social context are impacting on worlds that are geographically and culturally distant” (Smith & Protevi, 2018, p. 244). Furthermore, the reason why postcolonial theory is drawn to the issue of migrancy is that the migration/movement of people from formerly colonized third world countries to the center of the Empire is resulting in ever-changing encounters among cultures, and the principal focus of postcolonial studies is on literary expressions which “straddle the borders between colonized and colonizing nations” (Smith & Protevi, 2018, p. 244). Hitherto unreachable spaces have begun to be reachable due to the migratory surges of world populations and the ever-increasing outpouring of migrancy literature; and the communication of these literatures has never been more rapid than now. Migrancy is now looked upon as an emblem heralding the prospect of getting the generally “fixed relationship between place and identity” shattered (Carter, 2005, p. 54). Newly formed identities can be best articulated in alternatively created spaces: the possibilities for such creations are provided by the locus of migrancy which gets itself represented through migrant writers. According to postcolonial theorists, “by becoming mobile and by making narratives out of this mobility, people escape the control of states and national boundaries and the limited linear ways of understanding themselves which states promote in their citizens” (Smith & Protevi, 2018, p. 245). By breaking free the

boundaries of nation-state in a physical sense, and no longer encumbered by the state-inflicted restrictions the 'migrant' "is in a position of peculiar insight, blessed with a specific awareness of the relativity of cultural rules and forms" (Smith & Protevi, 2018, p. 246); and migrant narratives are inscriptions of the multiple perspectives of these migrants. Since migrants are able to draw comparisons between the reality of time present and time past, they are the possessors of a unique vision. While majority of humans own mainly and primarily the knowledge of only one home, one setting and one culture, expatriates are at the minimum acquainted with two which grants their vision such diversity as can bring about a recognition of contemporaneous elements, this is a sort contrapuntal consciousness (Said, 2001, p. 186).

Amin Maalouf is among those who share the postcolonial literary theorists' acclaimed aversion to the concept of roots. In his latest memoir *Origins*, his words on the first page are an echo of their thoughts. Giving a justification why he titled his memoir *Origins*, Maalouf says:

Someone other than I might have used the word "roots." It is not part of my vocabulary. I don't like the word, and I like even less the image it conveys. Roots burrow into the ground. Twist in the mud, and thrive in darkness; they hold trees in captivity from their inception and nourish them at the price of blackmail: "Free yourself and you'll die." (2009, p. x)

He rather picks 'routes' and 'roads' as his metaphor because on roads, contrary to trees, humans can move from one place to another by using their feet. In 1975 when the Civil War in Lebanon was rapidly coming to be a reality in the lives of the masses, Maalouf chose to fall back upon his feet to leave the roots behind. Migrating to Paris along with his wife and three children, he settled there forever. In 1994 after almost twenty years of the migration and four years of the truce, he went to visit Lebanon. *The Rock of Tanios* (1993/1994), constructed out of an episode in the history of Lebanon, contains some autobiographical references. Here he embraces the assumptions which the plane of migrancy insinuates. Migrancy grants him a point of vantage: he is a nomadic presence simultaneously at the outskirts of the national territory in Lebanon and in a self-imposed exile in Paris. He is the one who can call into question the very primacy of those narratives which the supporters of nationalism defend as absolute truths; and he is the one who can celebrate migrancy as something constructive. His choice of strategy for the narration of the tale is shrewd in the sense that it enables him to parallel the time present and the time past. Maalouf is a master story-teller, and here the maze-like storyline step by step moves forward to unfold the reality that any form of fixation with roots can result in gory repercussions remindful of the recent War in Lebanon: Tanios, the protagonist in the story, is obsessed with the question of finding his roots, namely that throughout the narrative he wanted to know who his real father was.

Maalouf's writings are manifestations of his preoccupation with the circumstances surrounding the rise of conflicts in general and with the beginning of the Civil War in his native land in particular. The fact of being an eye witness helps him explain such antagonisms from human perspective; and the same is the keynote in his *Rock of Tanios*. Since he never looks at the past as a lost ideal, he never tries to indulge in sentimental nostalgia of restoration in his writings. *The Rock of Tanios* is a narrative focusing on the people of Kfaryabda, a village in Lebanon; the time period is the nineteenth century in its middles when colonialists had just started scuffling across the Middle Eastern territories. A rock is the point of beginning in the tale; it is the Rock of Tanios, named after Tanios, a young man, because the last time Tanios was seen by the villagers before his mysterious disappearance was on that rock. Tanios' tale is told by a man who had heard it from

Gabriel, his grandfather's ninety-six years old cousin. The narrator is not a hear-say stranger; rather he tells the tale only after being able to get hold of the original records. And the principal sources from which he quotes are three. One manuscript was written by a monk who had passed away shortly after the First World War; while the other two scripts were the property of those two persons to whom Tanios was intimately related: the first one was an English clergyman Mr. Stolton who was Tanios' teacher; the second one was a scholarly muleteer Nader who was Tanios' friend. The recounter narrates that peculiar chain of events associated with the nativity of Tanios which had escalated the villagers' suspicions as to the identification of Tanios' biological father. Gerios and Lamia were Tanios' parents. Gerios was the chief steward in the household of Kfaryabda's Sheikh. The doubt rested on the Sheikh, who was a notorious libertine, that he had probably enticed Lamia too and consequently begotten Tanios. The wife of the Sheikh is also eaten up with doubts and burns with a desire for revenge. As it goes with the tribes, her family, signalling retribution against the Sheikh, arrives at his village with the intention of draining its resources through a continual series of extravagant feasts. The enmity between the two families increases to such an extent that it generates antipathy even among their whole villages. Growing up among these doubts and surroundings makes Tanios a precocious child; he picks out an alliance with Roukoz, the Sheikh's previous chief steward and present enemy, since the Sheikh had sent Roukoz into exile on accusations of deception. Tanios' affiliation with Roukoz proves an ill-omened decision and the harbinger of a never-ending series of worst occurrences. It drags all of the community into a savage series of hostilities the eventual result of which is that Gerios kills the Bishop. The bloodshed committed by Gerios proves enough to ensure Tanios that his real father is Gerios after all. He flees along with Gerios to Cyprus. For some time, they both keep themselves hidden there. In the long run, Gerios is tricked into returning to the settlement under false pretences; there he is ruthlessly slaughtered in punishment. Tanios reappears in the settlement only to play the role of a consular middleman between the Emir and the British. This makes him glorified in the eyes of the villagers who pay homage to him as a hero. But for the last time the villagers only saw of him was that he was sitting on a rock; seating himself in the nook of the rock for a long time, he was probably meditating and fretting on all those catastrophes which had been caused by him in his mediatory attempts. After that he had mysteriously disappeared, never to be seen by the villagers again. And since then a curse had been attached to that rock by the villagers, which is shared from generation to generation.

After narrating Tanios' mysterious fate, the present-day narrator tells of his uncertainty as to how much credence should be given to the stories of Tanios' life and destiny. The questions to which the narrator cannot determine the answers are: what had become of Tanios after leaving the village for the last time, whether he had gone back to Cyprus or had chosen some other destiny for himself cannot be determined by the narrator. His suggestion is that it is in vain to make efforts to weigh up the grounds that might have made Tanios stay against those that might have encouraged his departure.

After two years of Armistice in 1992 the situation of Lebanon makes one recognize how similar the destinies of Maalouf and Tanios are. The narrator becomes Maalouf's mouthpiece when he reflects on how many men might have followed in Tanios' invisible steps and left the village after Tanios; whether their reasons, their impulse, the pressure under which they had left were the same or not. Then the words of the narrator resonate with Maalouf's appraisal of his homeland when he says, "My mountains are like that. Attachment to the soil and aspiration towards departure. Place of refuge, place of passage. Land of milk and honey and of blood. Neither paradise nor hell. Purgatory" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 273). Although the narrator's words are a reinforcement of the reality of contemporary physical existence in Lebanon, it is only in the denouement of the narrative

when Maalouf informs his readers that a real-life incident which had come to pass in the nineteenth century had stimulated, though not in an exact way, the chain of events in his novel. It was the story of a killer, "certain Abou-kishk-Maalouf" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 275) who had killed a bishop and then gone to Cyprus along with his son as refugee. Later he was dodged into a scheme by the Emir's envoy who had made him come back to be executed, "The rest—the narrator, his village, his sources, his characters—all the rest is nothing but impure fiction" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 275). Here the antipathies are examined by Maalouf in a complex way; their evolution is exposed by means of intermeshing the feelings and emotions of pride, love, guile, compassion, doubt, violence, treachery and temptation. In this way, he successfully convinces the reader how any occurrence in history can have multiple dimensions. As a matter of course, the visions from the past War keep haunting him throughout the narrative. In the end he calls into question the credence and willingness of his readers to accept his rendering of the happenings as true and persuasive, though the reality of these events is that they are neither pure fiction nor an untainted reality. All through the narrative, an exploration of the different stages of Tanios' journey—the self-imposed exile from his Lebanese settlement to Cyprus, the intermediary home-coming and the final vanishing—becomes necessary for an explanation of the causes which had the likelihood of driving him to choose an exilic living. The lacking domination of identity politics causes the disruption of the cycle of strife in the novel. It is only when he flees to Cyprus that Tanios starts enjoying the newly-found pleasures of silence, bliss and anonymity. The narrative strategy is such as helps giving the impression of reality: the narrator keeps referring to various sources which are four in number, with continual interruptions in-between these sources to guarantee a thorough representation of the truth. Giving a careful introduction of his sources, he specifies not only their writing style, their framework but also the relationship of their writers with Tanios. Moreover, being set within the context of history and corresponding to a factual reality, the narrative becomes more likely to be interpreted as a real-life story.

While, the ever-on-the-move, brutal occurrences involving pride, conflict, vengeance and culpability going on in Tanios' Kfaryabda are formidably narrated with nothing omitted, the relation of Tanios' living in Cyprus is fantastically cheerful and optimistic, with the dominant ingredients of laughter, happiness, ecstasy, gratification and contentedness. *The Rock of Tanios* is divided into nine parts called 'Passages'; the Seventh Passage entitled "Oranges on the Stairs" giving details of the refugees' sojourn in Cyprus starts with these words, "In Famagusta, at this time, the two fugitives were beginning their new existence in terror and remorse, but their life was also to consist of daring, pleasures and carefree days" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 175). The past was no longer talked of between the father and the son; since the murder committed by Gerios in itself was a gesture, the only means of reclaiming his lost paternity in the eyes of his son, he had now become mute to the extent that "without any echo of his act, Gerios sometimes came to doubt its reality" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 176). Though in the beginning they were afraid of the foreign surroundings, yet later on both the son and the father began rejoicing and relishing in their newly-acquired freedom, "Their walks grew daily longer, and more confident. And one morning they were emboldened to go and sit in a coffee house" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 177). "To their astonishment, they were laughing. They could not remember the last time they laughed" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 178). Contrasted with the portrayal of Tanios' restless life in Kfaryabda, here in Famagusta life for Tanios became pure enjoyment of silent bliss, since all the interaction between Tanios and Tamar, his beloved, took place in complete silence. "They had not spoken a single word to each other, neither of them knew which language the other spoke, but they slept as one" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 182). And Tanios kept wondering:

Did I have to go into exile, and land without hope in this foreign town, in this hostelry, and climb the stairs to the top floor; following a stranger...did the waves of existence have to carry me so far from me to be entitled to this moment of bliss? Such intense bliss that it could be the reason for my adventure. And its culmination. And my redemption. (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 183)

Starting with a chance meeting, Tanios' rendezvous with Tamar had pacified him physically and spiritually. His newly-acquired happiness was vouchsafed to him by his migration. Taking this into consideration, it is not surprising to notice how Asma, his previous lady-love, for whose sake Gerios was compelled to kill the Patriarch and the whole community was driven into savagery and disintegration, had completely gone into oblivion for Tanios; the importance he had once given to her looked ridiculous, he "had thought so little about her since he left" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 183). The intimidations and suppressions he had gone through with regard to Asma and her recollections were of "little resemblance to this supreme pleasure that he now knew" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 183). In the tranquility of his exilic position he "saw things more clearly" (p. 183); being able to think in a more rational way, he could grasp his own past follies. Through his migrancy, Tanios had encountered in the form of Famagusta "on this island, so close to his homeland and yet so distant: a haven where he could lie and wait" (*Rock of Tanios* Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 188).

However, many factors were there to make the perspectives of the father and the son poles apart from each other. With stoic resignation, Gerios whiled his time away in Cyprus waiting to go back. He no more desired to "to run from one port of exile to another" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 187). He wanted to depart from Famagusta just to be in his country and with his wife for the last time. What befell Gerios is the only unquestionably recorded historical truth in the story. Compared with him, Tanios was constantly conscious of the capability of his community to rouse barbarity. Once the possibility of going back to the 'home' materialized, Tanios was not any more sure of himself whether he really wanted to return to his previous life in the mountains or not. When back there in the corporeal sense, he too shared Maalouf's feeling of being a misfit among those people, it was "as if he were in disguise" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 236), "faced with the murmurs and looks, he could not breathe, he thought only of fleeing" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 255). The recollections of the "serenity" of the foreign land stood in intense contrast to the ferociousness and confusion of the homeland; these coupled with the recounter's incessant remarks about Tanios' longing for flight—he also did explicitly recognize the plausible causes of Tanios' withdrawal— are useful in dismissing the mythic lore about Tanios. A reconfrontation with the miserable circumstances of his mountainous settlement and the fact of what they had done to Gerios who had been cheated by a migrant fellow compelled him to ponder the prospect of "leaving, going far away, as far as possible" (Maalouf, 1993/1994, p. 206). It is the historical background of the story which makes it distinguished from all other fictions written in the context of the Lebanese War. Here Maalouf makes no straightforward dealings with the War of Lebanon, rather it is the past in which he seems to have the feeling of being more at ease. However, the maintenance of contemporaneity which the narrative keeps reverberating illustrates the choice of migrancy when at crossroads as advantageous. When the war displaces people and deprives them of the solace and safety of their homes, migrancy becomes the plane providing those displaced and dispossessed people the possibility of making a new 'home and promising a way out of the never-ending vicious rotation of the conflicts.

Conclusion

In *Rock of Tanios* the suggestion given by Maalouf is that the birthplace is not always the home, and when the place where Tanios was born pronounced his compassion as his guilt, and chalked out and dictated his future course in accordance with the background of his nativity, it was not 'home' for him anymore. 'Home' is the place where one's identity—who I am—assumes a secondary status and connectedness with others on a more compassionate level becomes primary. Thus Maalouf's strategy of narration here does multifold job: while on one hand it illuminates the difference between birthplace and the plane of migrancy, on the other hand, through the modern narrator's obsession with finding the truths behind the myths, it invites the readers to compare and contrast the present and past strifes of the Lebanese nation. The proposition given by Maalouf is that since the notion of the nation is a proven myth—with all its metanarratives of roots and identities as collectivities—by challenging it, the rewriting of history can be made possible, in such a way that coexistence is facilitated and the monopolized hold of any group on truth and the oedipal-territorial power structures are demolished.

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