Rebuilding a house, reconstructing a world: Anthony Shadid's *House of Stone: a Memoir of Home, Family and a Lost Middle East*

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The political context of the Middle East has, for decades now, been subjected to a dialectics of destruction-reconstruction which seems to command the realities and the daily lives of the peoples in that region. This is nowhere more visible than in Lebanon where the regional and international interests translate into latent and quite often open conflicts. In fact, after independence, Arab secular intellectuals saw in Lebanon's ethnic and religious diversity the perfect background for "modernity," since diversity, when combined with a culture of acceptance and tolerance, is more likely to lead to the emergence of an all-inclusive national narrative. But what happened was quite the opposite. The exacerbation of differences as it has been the case for decades now produced divisive politics and narratives of mutual exclusion and conflict. Thus the modern history of Lebanon, and the whole Middle East, is characterized by the intermittence of violence and peace, destruction and reconstruction. While this may be reason enough for many in the Lebanese diaspora to despair of ever seeing their country live in peace, it does not prevent others from envisioning a future for their country of origin.

This is the case of the late Anthony Shadid, a reporter for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, whose book *House of Stone: A memoir of Home, Family and a Lost Middle East* (2012) chronicles his project of rebuilding his ancestor's house in southern Lebanon. Yet more than just an account of his stay and daily bargains with local builders and other artisans, the book is a reflection on the current state and politics of the Middle East. It is also a meditation on exile, diaspora and the myth of homecoming. On another level, the book triggers reflection on the sense of being at 'home' which can be approached in the Heideggerian sense of "poetically dwelling in this world" (Heidegger, 1951), where the author's project of reconstruction is poetic in its essence. This dimension of the book does actually lend a deeper sense to the act of rebuilding the ancestor's house by an author in search of home and eager to (re)build, not just a building made of stone and concrete, but a world where life takes full meaning. Thus, the narrative sets off with a series of implicit enquiries, such as: What is a house? Is it just a building that gives shelter? A place that offers comfort and privacy? A site of childhood memories and ancestors' stories? Or is it a dream that can never be really attained? Very often, 'house' in common usage is interchangeable with 'home.' However, from an exilic point of view, home is certainly more than all the common things people associate with house. It is first and foremost the proof that one is in exile; for 'home' takes on a higher significance only when one is away from it. That is what

gives its intensity to the myth of homecoming, a recurring motif in all cultures, and which for migrants translates into an obsessive and transgenerational idea of an eventual return to the place of origin.

The fluidity of Home and Identity

But home is not always a physical reality. In Arabic, 'bayt' is more than just a material house; in its more symbolic meaning, it stands for where one truly belongs, a place where one's roots are deeply grounded. In poetry, 'bayt' stands for verse or a poetic line, and it is in this perspective that poetry in Arab culture has always been seen as fundamental to man's existence. The poetic aspect of 'bayt-home' is distinctly further strengthened by the situation of exile and migration where home is often elevated to the mythical status of origins and roots left behind by former generations and that has a perpetual magnetic pull over the subject. It nurtures a mythical/nostalgic vision of the country or land of origin. Hence the sense of what can be called a foundational ambivalence at the heart of identity for subjects of immigrant descent. Therefore, being Lebanese-American, Anthony Shadid is in that position of being 'in-between' two worlds, two cultures and two languages. Thus, it is significant that his sense of belonging, presumably related to Lebanon and the Middle East, clearly shifts towards a critical positioning where neither home nor identity are determined by ethnicity, faith, or country of citizenship, but by a relational nature of immigrant hyphenated identity of being Lebanese-American, Eastern-Western.

In fact, the book's title bears a significance that transcends the basic meaning of home in the fixed sense of an unquestionable rootedness in one place. Indeed, in the process of reconstructing his great-grandfather's house and reflecting on his own identity in the light of the experience he gained in a region riven with visible and subtle conflicts, he realizes that the conventional sense of belonging and identity are illusive. Echoing the Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf, Shadid's reconstruction of his ancestor's house leads to a deeper reflection on identity and how when this latter is romanticized or reduced to faith, ethnicity, ideology, or nationalism it becomes murderous (Maalouf).

Anthony Shadid, who died covering the uprisings in Syria, wrote his last book (*House of Stone*) with a double vision. Of the past he retained the plural character of life and culture in the Levant, the fabled reminiscence of an old and tolerant Middle East. He also retained the context and the histories of his family's migration to America. Of the present he retained the actual state of abandonment which befell his ancestor's house and the crippling atmosphere of intolerance and unrest. Between the irretrievable past and the indefinable present, the narrator tries to find room for hope and reconciliation. This is the real story of a poetic

project: the reconstruction of a 'mythical home' that stands not just for a house, the ruins of which still existed in southern Lebanon, and which the author decided to rebuild according to the original design, but a timeless place where origin and ending, past and present can be brought together to form a perfect circle, to start a new and hopeful cycle for the future.

The book opens on an introductory chapter in which the narrator tries to capture the meaning of 'bayt'—altogether a word, an idea and a feeling that "resonates beyond rooms and walls, summoning longings gathered about family and home" (Shadid xiii). Set in the world's most unstable region, its symbolic significance resides in its attempt to reconstruct not just a home, but the history of what had happened in that region, the stories and the context of migration from the area.

Based on a collection of images most of which come from tales and recounted stories of a simple joyful living, wars and exile, the book tells the story of Isber Samara (Shadid's great-grandfather) who initially built the house in Jedeidet Marjayoun and who was a kind of mythic figure, a self-made man in a glorious but slowly disappearing Levant. His house, built on a hill in a town that was itself at the crossroads of trade "routes plied by Christians, Muslims, and Jews" and that "stitched together the tapestry of an old middle east" (Shadid xv), welcomed the traveler and spoke "of things Levantine and of a way of life to which Isber aspired" (Shadid xv). It recalled "a lost era of openness before the Ottoman Empire fell, when all sorts drifted through homelands shared by all" (Shadid xiv). In a sense, the house, and by extension Jedeidet Marjayoun, the crossroad of routes to Damascus, Jerusalem and Sidon, was an Omphalos that brought together different religions, cultures, languages and ethnicities.

Rebuilding such a house is an act of faith in the future of a once glorious town and country, a search for the lost Levant shattered by the disasters of the 20th century. Against a backdrop of ruins and total abandonment, *House of Stone* would stand as symbol for the reconstruction of a town and an end to a cycle of disintegration and loss:

> Marjayoun is fading, as it has been for decades. It can no longer promise the attraction of market Fridays, when all turned out in their finery—women in dresses from Damascus, gentlemen with gleaming pocket watches brought from America [....]. In the Saha, or town square, there are dusty things—marked down for decades—for sale. No merchant shine counters or offer sherbets made from snow, or sell exotic tobaccos [....]. The town no longer looks out to the world, and it is far from kept up. Everywhere it is scattered with bits and pieces, newspapers from other decades, odd things old people save. Of course, no roads run through Marjayoun anymore. A town whose reach once spanned historic Syria, grasping Arish in the faraway Sinai Peninsula of Egypt before extending, yet farther, to the confluence of the Blue and the White Niles, now stretches only a mile or so down its main thoroughfare. (Shadid xv-xvi)

In the context of war and destruction, the act of rebuilding can be seen differently depending on whether one is optimistic or pessimistic. In the first case, it stands for courage and commitment to life, in the latter, it is insane and totally useless. Although he is conscious that the fruit of his endeavors may at any minute be shattered by a misguided missile or a bulldozer, Shadid insists on rebuilding his ancestor's house against the advice of everyone and especially the local people in Marjayoun. His stubbornness conveys his desire to reclaim the first part of his hyphenated identity so common among Americans. Like most US citizens, Shadid carried this dual identity of being Arab-American or Lebanese-American, which in the case of minorities often triggers a search for compromise and a balancing of the two sides of one's identity.

For Shadid, recounting the progress of the reconstruction of his ancestors' house cannot be separated from History; thus the personal and the universal histories are intertwined and interdependent. Like the narrator of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1983) whose personal history cannot be separated from the history of modern India, the author of *House of Stone* needed to conjure the history of the Fall of the Ottoman empire in the hands of the French and British colonial powers in order to tell his own family's history:

> My aunts and uncles, grandparents and great-grandparents, were part of a century-long wave of migration that occurred as the Ottoman Empire crumbled, then fell, around the time of World War I [...] the war marked years of violent anarchy that made bloodshed casual. Disease was rife. And so was famine, created by the British and French, who enforced a blockade of all Arab ports in the Mediterranean. Hundreds of thousands starved to death in Lebanon and Syria, Palestine and beyond. Isber's region was not spared. A reliable survey of 182 villages in the area showed that a fourth of the homes there had withered into wartime ruin, and more than a third of the people who had inhabited them had died. (Shadid xvii)

With this fall came the disintegration of the Levant, a multilingual, multicultural realm that spanned three continents, unshackled by borders. In Shadid's rendering, the Ottoman world was one of dignity, time-honored traditions and grandeur. It was also a world where a poor man with ambition and vision like Isber Samara could achieve success. Thus, his narrative moves along the lines of many contrapuntal tales that form a mosaic, each with its own tonal colors just like the tiles that paved the floors of Isber's House. First, there is the story of the "native son" who dreams of reconstructing "home" in a war-blasted, conflict-ridden region, then there is the family saga of the Shadids and the Samaras, a tumultuous history of his family's life in Lebanon and their eventual exile to America after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. Then, there is the often humorous chronicle of his effort to

rebuild the house, dealing with unpredictable craftsmen, quirky relatives, and an unsteady political situation and village gossips about his supposed ties with the CIA. Finally there is the disintegration of the Levant and the subsequent partition and colonization of the region by the French and the English.

These stories are woven together to tell the story of Anthony Shadid himself, a writer who seeks connections, commonalities and deeper explanations of complex realities, while struggling to reconnect to his family's history, a kind of spiritual journey toward *bayt* with its connotations of community and of belonging. In the process, the narrative tells the unsung history of a man, a family and a community that witnessed the unfolding of History and registered its impact on their destiny. Such a man was Isber Samara, a Bedouin at heart and a shrewd businessman who was determined to "take his place among the families that had looked down on his own" (Shadid xv)—that is, to become a country gentleman. He made a fortune as a grain merchant, and built an elegant stone house with a red-tiled roof, iron-railed balconies and fabulously tiled spacious rooms. But his achievement coincided with the Ottoman Empire's disintegration. The British and the French divided it into colonies and protectorates separated by artificial boundaries giving birth to improbable states, and eventually creating what is now called the Middle East, an area where world powers play war games and where the irrational politics of its rulers feed toxic nationalisms and sectarian conflicts.

Exploring family archives, diaries, letters and the inherited tales and stories he heard all his life, the narrator traces his ancestors' progress through the 19th and 20th centuries, from their births, marriages, deaths and/or eventual migration to North America, in pursuit of happiness. Using their histories as a background as well as the canvas on which his own narrative develops, the narrator blames his own "pursuit of happiness," in its modern version i.e., pursuit of success as a reporter, for the dissolution of his own marriage, and his feeling of homelessness. In fact, after six years of absence, his wife simply decided that life was too short to waste it waiting for a wandering reporter. Shadid seemed thus to be destined to carry his ancestors' curse: exile. His search for home and community is behind the whole enterprise of rebuilding the house. He says, "Community is everything; home is everything, if you have lost your own" (Shadid 12). But his whole endeavor is no more than the search for an anchorage that would be there just in case, a symbolic grounding in a mythic land, not really meant to be a permanent residence. However, the people of Marjayoun have quite a different opinion; they receive the native son with a combination of suspicion and bewilderment. His "ambition to rebuild the house was considered foolish and rash by [his] new neighbors, not to mention reckless, dangerous, and altogether "American" (Shadid 28). In other words, they think he is insane because the family's house belongs to a large clan.

They point out that, as one of many heirs, he does not own the house and therefore has no legal right to rebuild it. But as he concedes, he "was raised with an innocence at odds with the experience of [his] pragmatic Arab ancestors. To be born in these parts of the world is not only to know loss and rumination, but also to savor the endless pleasures of discord" (Shadid 26).

A vision for the future

Rebuilding the house is his way of reclaiming his place in the world. Perhaps unconsciously, he seeks to resurrect, on one small plot of ground in one small town, a vestige of his great-grandfather's era. That is not apparent to him at first. It is revealed as the demolition of what stands between now and then gets underway. Decade by decade, the house unveils itself, and Shadid begins to see into the past (Caputo). "Perhaps because I had been so long discontented with the world around me, I increasingly turned my attention to Isber's world," (53) he writes. The house was still a remnant of another time, an artifact in a way that symbolically unites the family, the clan, the community and eventually the whole Lebanon. In fact, like the author's family who "never quite arrived home" (Shadid xiv), Lebanon, and by extension the Middle East, has also quite never been able to carry a sense of "*bayt*/home" for its multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic people to re-collect themselves and live and thrive peacefully.

Once the reconstruction was over, Shadid makes a deep and revealing observation: "I had returned and rescued a home, in a gesture to history and memory, in the name of an ideal, however misunderstood. But in time I would abandon it, leaving a relic, however functional or beautiful" (Shadid 243). The house would be abandoned precisely because instead of being just a channel to the past, or a facsimile of it, it had become part of what was and what would and could be. Shadid's optimistic revelation is a testament to the necessity of obstinacy in attempting to rebuild a community of opposites into one of shared goals and common interests. In fact, Anthony Shadid was symbolically putting the parts of the puzzle of Lebanon back in order but in doing so, he realized that the model (the golden image of the Levant) is no longer practical; he needed to invent a new one that would appease the moment and invent the future. Contrary to what many reviewers thought, his obsession with the traditional tiles, those vestiges of the irretrievable Levant—a word that, to many, calls to mind an older, more tolerant, more indulgent Middle East—articulates not a nostalgic return to a lost world, but a reflection on what had been, for the sake of the future. The mosaic pattern is what he hopes this land would achieve; its heterogeneity no longer the cause of disruption but the cement that would glue all the components together.

Thus, the reconstruction of the house is more than the materialization of an imagined past, it is the invention of a space where a peaceful 'living together' is possible. Like the mythical Levant, it is an imagined cultural space, open, fragmentary and thus likely to accommodate the differences and the stark oppositions that prevail in that region today. And where the notion of space is open, fragmentary, or fuzzy, identity cannot be approached as fixed, determined, and absolute. Therefore, *House of Stone* is an intermediary space, an in-between dimension, a site for new experiences of identity and difference. It articulates the question of space as related to culture and identity in terms other than the usual conceptions of a fixed world of forms, a spatial unity and a pre-given order. In fact, taking into account the overlapping territories of language, culture and geography that the Middle East has historically been known for and the undeniable facts of colonialism, cross-migration and historical and cultural interpenetrations, it becomes clear that identity cannot be founded on originary facts of ethnicity, language, religion, history, or geographic territory. In the same way, identity cannot be conceived of in exclusion but in relation with the other, as Edouard Glissant argues[1]. Shadid envisions a cultural space where difference–not sameness–prevails, where identity is constructed through the incorporation of difference not through its rejection. A view akin to the notion of "rhizome thinking" ("la pensée du rhizome") as opposed to "root thinking" ("la pensée de la racine"). In *A Thousand Plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari point out that the "single root" is the one that kills everything around it, while the "rhizome root" is that which reaches out to the other roots. Edouard Glissant applies this metaphor to the question of identity and associates it to his postulate of "atavistic" and "composite" cultures[2]. He argues that "single root" identity, which has not always been deadly, is associated with the nature of what he calls "atavistic cultures", while "rhizome root" identity is associated with "composite cultures." The opposition that often exists in these cultures between the "atavistic" and the "composite" accounts for ethnic tensions, racism and intolerance.

The sense of home in *House of Stone* is therefore thought of in terms other than the nostalgia of a return and a mythologizing of one's origin. It is conceived of as a place where "dwelling" is conceivable. For Heidegger, the idea of "dwelling" means the relational nature of being in the world, which, according to him, only poetry is capable of disclosing (Heidegger 1954: 143-

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[1] "The identity claim is no more than an utterance if it is not also the measure of a saying. However, when we designate and inform the forms of our saying, it leads to Relation." (Glissant 1997: 32. My translation).

[2] Glissant explains that "atavistic culture is one that proceeds from the idea of a Genesis and that of a filiation in order to seek a legitimacy over a land which from that moment turns into a territory. […] We know the ethnic devastations of this magnificent and deadly conception. I have linked the principle of rhizome identity with the existence of composite cultures, i.e., cultures in which a creolisation is practiced (Glissant 1996: 60. My translation).

162). A fundamental characteristic of this sense of dwelling is its openness to the world and its capacity to see beyond the limits and boundaries of self and culture. In Shadid's memoir, this openness emerges as the space where things are interconnected, not just between themselves but also with the world, past, present, and future. Accordingly, the sense of dwelling relies on a poetics of relation that defines identity and culture, not in isolation, but in connection with the other, with things, with the world, and this involves a profound questioning of the ways in which we relate to, and represent, objects, language, the others, the world, and ourselves.

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