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The return was never here: mnemohistory, nostalgia and the fiction of home

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper interrogates the idea of ‘return’ in women’s migration through the lens of *mnemohistory*: a mode of analysis that centres memory not as passive inheritance but as active construction. Framed by the provocative claim that *the return was never here*, the article explores how return migration is less a homecoming than a gendered performance shaped by nostalgia, postmemory, affective labour. Drawing on Boym’s (2001) distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia, Hirsch’s (1997) theory of postmemory and Ahmed’s (2004; p. 2010) work on affective economies, the article explores how familial, national, diasporic imaginaries recruit women into emotionally charged scripts of cultural restoration. Through a constellation of theorists including Halbwachs (1992), Assmann and Czaplicka (1995), Braidotti (1994) and Gordon (2008), it argues that return is not a reversal of departure but a looping, haunted process of remembering, often requiring women to reconcile inherited fictions of ‘home’ with present dissonance. By shifting focus from structural integration to mnemonic desire, the paper offers new theoretical insights into how return migration operates as a site of affective contradiction, memory politics and feminist refusal. It invites us to imagine ‘home’ not as a destination but as a verb still in the making.

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Introduction: the promise of home that was never promised

She stepped off the plane with an overstuffed suitcase, the wheels catching briefly on the tarmac cracks. The air smelled almost right ... briny with a hint of diesel, familiar but thinner somehow, as if someone had washed the scent with memory and wrung it dry. Her mother was waiting by the arrivals gate, waving in that way that mothers wave when time has been folded too many times over itself. Home, they called it. Return, they said. But the house had been repainted, her bedroom was a sewing room now and her accent sat uneasily between syllables: too slow for here, too sharp for there. She hadn’t come back to what she left. She’d come back to what they remembered.

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This article is oriented toward theoretical and conceptual inquiry, with the discussion beginning here: in that mismatch between memory and matter, between the fantasy of return and its disorienting reality. It asks: *what is 'return' when the 'home' being returned to exists more in memory than in materiality?* And more pointedly: *whose memories shape that home and whose labour is required to make it livable again?*

Rather than treating return migration as a simple reversal of out-migration, I approach it as an affective and mnemonic process: one *haunted* by histories not entirely one's own, by unspoken desires and by the labour of reconciling past and present. This approach draws on mnemohistory, which I employ as a theoretical and methodological lens for tracing how the past is remembered, mobilised, felt in the present (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). It is informed by traditions in cultural memory studies (Halbwachs, 1992; Hirsch, 2008), post-qualitative inquiry (Barad, 2006; Lugones, 2007) and feminist theorising of embodiment and affect (Ahmed, 2004; Gordon, 2008), which collectively foreground the entanglement of memory, emotion and social context in shaping how return migration is experienced and understood.

Mnemohistory as theorised by Assmann (1995), departs from conventional historiography. It is not interested in accuracy but in *relevance* ... not in what was but in what is remembered and how that memory structures identity. For women return migrants, memory does not simply travel with them; it precedes them, saturates them and often defines the terrain to which they are 'welcomed back'. The return is never clean. It is cluttered with postcards from a childhood that wasn't hers, with family recipes she never learned, with national anthems she only half-remembers. It is, in other words, a return to a fiction: one shaped by intergenerational longing, political nostalgia and gendered expectations.

To navigate this, I draw on a constellation of theorists who have long examined the affective economies of memory. Hirsch's (1997, p. 2008) concept of *postmemory* is central: the idea that the second generation can inherit not just stories but the *affective weight* of experiences they never lived. In the context of return migration, this means that women may carry with them an imagined homeland passed down through maternal narratives, diaspora rituals or photo albums: each one editing out the messier truths of home.

But these memories are rarely benign. Boym's (2001) influential work on *nostalgia* offers a lens for understanding the politics of these returns. Boym distinguishes between *restorative nostalgia* (which seeks to reconstruct the lost home) and *reflective nostalgia* (which dwells in the longing itself) and the former often dominates nationalistic narratives of return, turning women into symbolic caretakers of cultural continuity. The latter, by contrast, allows space for irony, uncertainty, feminist refusal. It is in this ambivalence that many returnee women live.

If memory makes the return possible, it is *affect* that gives it texture. Ahmed's (2004, p. 2010) theory of *affective economies* helps explain how emotions (shame, guilt, pride, homesickness) are circulated through familial and political discourses to bind women to the home and to the fantasy of its restoration. These emotions do not emerge spontaneously; they stick to bodies through repetition and proximity. Returning women often find themselves *affectively responsible* for making the return meaningful: caring, cooking, smoothing over time's rough edges.

Finally, I borrow from Halbwachs' (1992) notion of *collective memory* and Braidotti's (1994) concept of *nomadic subjectivity* to reframe the returnee woman not as a stable identity but as a shifting constellation of past attachments, present negotiations, future projections. The home she returns to is not a fixed location but a memoryscape constantly under construction ... by others as much as by herself.

This article aims to reposition return migration not as a logistical movement across space but as a symbolic and emotional encounter with memory. It explores how the idea of return is imagined, inherited, imposed, often through gendered forms of storytelling and labour. In doing so it invites a reconsideration of what it means to 'go back' and whether such a place ever existed at all.

Nostalgia as gendered infrastructure

Nostalgia is not just a feeling; it's an architecture. Built not of bricks and mortar but of stories, recipes, national anthems, recycled lullabies. In return migration, this structure often waits like a trap disguised as a welcome mat. For women, in particular, nostalgia arrives not as a gentle yearning but as a call to duty. Come home, it says. But also: come fix what's been lost. Bring the language back. Cook the food right. Relearn the rituals. Be the bridge, the balm, the proof that nothing was really broken.

To understand how such expectations are structured and gendered, I turn to Boym (2001), whose seminal work *The Future of Nostalgia* offers a taxonomy of longing: *restorative vs reflective* nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia, Boym argues, is not content to mourn. It wants to rebuild. It believes in the 'truth' of a lost home and seeks to recreate it, brick by metaphysical brick. Reflective nostalgia by contrast, dwells in ambivalence, embraces the cracks, resists the fantasy of a seamless return.

Restorative nostalgia, Boym writes, puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps (2001). This is the nostalgia deployed by nation-states, diaspora organisations and even family WhatsApp groups: those busy factories of idealised pasts. Returnee women often find themselves enlisted in this project of home reconstruction not because they desire it but because they are *positioned* as the only ones who can do it 'right'.

Scholars have described the moral expectations placed on migrant women to sustain family and nation as a *gendered moral economy*: an ideology that moralises women's affective and reproductive labour as national duty (Kofman, 2012; Silvey, 2006). Building on this, I use *restorative nostalgia* to show how such obligations intensify upon return, as the emotional work of 'bringing it back' transforms longing into an infrastructural force that organises how return is felt and enacted.

Consider state-sponsored return programs across MENA and Eastern Europe, where women are often spotlighted as 'guardians of tradition' or 'mothers of the nation'. In Morocco for instance, development NGOs working with returnee women frequently frame their role as 'cultural mediators' who bring modern skills home while preserving family values (De Haas & Van Rooij, 2010). Similarly, media campaigns targeting returnees from Eastern Europe to post-socialist homelands often depict the ideal returnee woman as someone who revives fading customs, teaches the language to her children and domesticates neoliberal dislocation with ethnic pride neatly folded into the laundry.

Comparable logics surface in programmes such as South Korea's *Overseas Koreans Foundation* and Ireland's *Global Irish: Diaspora Strategy*, where the affective labour of return is couched in the language of renewal and restoration. In South Korea, initiatives inviting *gyopo* (overseas Koreans) 'back home' often celebrate the act of return as a way to recover an imagined cultural essence lost through migration, positioning diasporic women as agents who 're-root' family ethics within global modernity (Park, 2019). Ireland's efforts similarly mobilise nostalgia through the trope of 'coming home' to help rebuild the nation after economic crisis: marketing return as a civic duty and also as an emotional reparation for historical dispersal (Boyle & Kavanagh, 2018).

These discourses are rarely subtle. The rhetoric of 'bringing it back' or 'restoring our heritage' operates as nostalgia and also as *infrastructure* ... a soft system of emotional logistics that determines how return migration is felt, imagined, enacted. Women become the emotional supply chain for cultural recovery. The past is not merely remembered; it is outsourced to them for maintenance.

Enter Ahmed and her theory of *affective economies* (2004). Ahmed argues that emotions do not simply reside in subjects but circulate: sticking to bodies, signs, objects through repetition. Affective economies explain how feelings like 'gratitude', 'longing' or 'pride' do more than express attachment; they *create* it. They manufacture alignment between the personal and the political. In the context of return migration, affective economies make it seem natural (almost moral) for women to be grateful for the opportunity to return 'home', to feel pride in reviving a culture that often excluded or marginalised them in the first place.

Ahmed writes, emotions do things: they align individuals with communities (or bodily space with social space) through the very intensity of their attachments (2004). Thus, a returning woman's pride in wearing traditional dress, her tearful joy at speaking her grandmother's tongue or her bittersweet longing for 'how things were' are not just emotions. They are acts of alignment, emotional performances that bind her to a national imaginary, even when that imaginary has no room for her complexity.

But what happens when these feelings don't arrive on schedule? When the returning woman doesn't feel pride, only awkwardness? When her attempts to re-domesticate the home fall flat? When the past feels like a borrowed costume two sizes too small? Here, *Boym's* reflective nostalgia offers a potential site of refusal. Rather than rebuild what was, reflective nostalgia lingers in the gaps. It allows women to laugh at the absurdity of the 'authentic' welcome-home dinner, to reject the script of restoration and to dwell in the imperfect, plural, unresolved.

Yet this reflective mode is often culturally illegible. There is little public space for ironic or ambivalent returns. The returnee woman is expected to either conform (gratefully) or be pathologised as rootless, disloyal or selfish. Ahmed's notion of *non-performativity* (2010), the idea that some refusals do not register as acts at all, helps explain how women who don't perform expected forms of cultural affection are often seen as failing socially and ontologically. Their return doesn't count. It's as if they never came back at all.

The pressure to *feel right* on return (to embody longing, gratitude, pride in the correct proportions) is not simply interpersonal. It is political. As Berlant (2008) reminds us, affect is a technology of citizenship. In a world where women's belonging is often conditional, those who return are tested for their paperwork or economic viability and also for their emotional fidelity to home.

Thus, nostalgia becomes more than sentiment. It becomes a form of *gendered infrastructure*: an emotional scaffolding that shapes who gets to belong, who must labour to make others feel at home and who is blamed when the fantasy doesn't land. It organises return as a stage-managed performance, with women as both the props and the stagehands. To 'go home' is not just to arrive; it is to *perform* home. Over and over. Often in uncomfortable shoes.

To close this section, let us return to the materialities of these affective infrastructures. Photographs, national dress, songs played at diaspora weddings: all circulate as carriers of nostalgic capital. They do not passively represent memory; they actively shape it. As Appadurai (2010) noted in his work on cultural reproduction, the past is a scarce object in the imagination of the nation. For women returnees, that scarcity often manifests as pressure: to remember correctly, to feel authentically, to transmit seamlessly.

But memory is messy. And return (if I can still call it that) is rarely a neat arrival. It is a negotiation between affective demand and emotional dissonance, between what the nation needs her to feel and what she actually feels. Nostalgia then, is not just a longing for the past. It is a *disciplinary* force, cloaked in the warm language of belonging but loaded with instructions.

Postmemory, inherited longing and the fiction of return

There's a peculiar ache that comes with missing a place you've never lived. It hums quietly under the skin, like a language you almost know. Many returnee women don't return to their own memories of home; they return to *someone else's*. To a grandmother's kitchen described in lullabies. To a courtyard glimpsed in a faded photograph. To a place that's more myth than map.

This is the territory of *postmemory*, a term coined by Hirsch (1997; expanded 2012) to describe the transmission of traumatic or affective memory from one generation to the next. Originally developed in the context of Holocaust studies, Hirsch defines postmemory as the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before (1997). The memories are not lived directly but inherited through stories, images, behaviours: so powerful, so monumental as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.

In the context of return migration, postmemory functions as a haunting and also as a compass. It provides orientation, albeit an unreliable one. Many returnees do not go home; they follow the breadcrumbs of someone else's grief, pride, longing. A returnee daughter might seek out the street her mother once mourned only to find it replaced by a parking lot. A granddaughter might feel an inexplicable connection to a homeland whose national anthem she only knows from cassette tapes mailed in the 1980s. The imagined home becomes a kind of phantom limb: felt intensely but no longer (or never) present.

Postmemory is often maternal in texture. Family albums, food rituals, bedtime stories: they operate as conduits through which memory slips between generations. These channels are gendered and so too is the responsibility to carry them. Women disproportionately inherit the task of remembering both emotionally and materially. Who else gets asked to keep the family recipe alive? Who else is shamed for 'forgetting where they come from'?

Imagine a returnee woman stepping into her grandmother's village, clutching a photograph decades older than her passport. The photo shows a small fig tree near a door. She walks up and down the dusty roads, tilting the photo like a map but the fig tree is gone, the door painted over, a satellite dish now interrupts the skyline. Her return is not a meeting of past and present but a collision.

This friction (between what is remembered and what is encountered) defines many return migrations. It is not simply a disappointment. It is a disorientation that calls into question the very category of 'home'. Said (2000) reminds us that exile creates not just a condition of being without a home but rather a condition of perpetual estrangement from the self and from the world. When home becomes a spectral inheritance, return can feel more like cosplay than belonging.

And yet the expectation of fluency (cultural, emotional, linguistic) remains. Here I again feel the weight of Ahmed's (2004) *affective economies*, which show how feelings attach to bodies and signs through circulation. The returnee woman is expected to *feel* at home even if she is encountering that home for the first time. Her lack of affective alignment is seen not as systemic but as personal failure: she has not returned correctly. She might ask: 'Why don't I feel what I'm supposed to feel?'

The answer is rarely simple. She may have inherited the longing but not the tools to navigate it. Her mother may have given her stories but not the grammar to express her dislocation. Her homecoming is scripted like a romance but performed like a farce.

Barthes (1981) in *Camera Lucida*, writes about the *punctum*: the little wound in a photo that pricks the viewer, often unexpectedly. For the postmemory subject, family photos often wound in exactly this way. A returnee might obsess over a child in the background of a picture or the wallpaper in a great-aunt's living room. These details, banal to others, become sacred relics ... epistemic anchors in a sea of dislocation.

In such images the returnee does not see the past. She sees the scaffolding of her future nostalgia. These are not just pictures; they are instruction manuals for how to feel. But the gap between the image and the embodied encounter (between *there* and *here*, *then* and *now*) can be abyssal.

And this abyss is gendered. Returnee men are often celebrated for economic contributions, political activism or even linguistic inarticulacy: charming signs of their global credentials. But returnee women, particularly daughters of the diaspora, are more often scrutinised for their embodiment of 'authentic' values. Did she learn the language? Can she cook the food? Is her skirt too short? Her failure to *enact* home as remembered by others is read not as the inevitable failure of postmemory but as a personal betrayal.

These dynamics can play out in absurd, heartbreaking or quietly comic ways. In one imagined exchange, a returnee woman arrives for a family lunch:

- Aunt: You don't remember your cousin Mariam? You played together in the river.
 Returnee: I've never met her. I was born in London.
 Aunt: Oh but you remember! You just forgot.

This collapsing of memory and identity (where you are told you *should* remember) produces what Kuhn (1995) calls *memory work*: the process of interrogating how personal memory intersects with cultural and collective narratives. For returnee women, memory work is often unpaid labour. They must do the remembering for the family, the nation, the generation before them.

Return becomes a form of *emotional archaeology*, where women are expected to dig through inherited rubble and reconstruct meaning. But what if the pieces don't fit? What if the stories contradict? What if the song lyrics change depending on who sings them?

At its most generous, postmemory allows for ambiguity. Hirsch (2012) is clear that postmemory is not about fidelity to the past but about ethical relationship. It is not about owning trauma but about acknowledging its residue. Still in return migration contexts, this ethical ambiguity is often foreclosed by the pressure to *perform coherence*: to make the past legible and the present tidy.

In this sense the returnee woman is not a traveller but a translator, tasked with converting spectral memory into embodied presence. But the translation is never smooth. Words fall apart. Meanings shift. And still she is asked to speak the language of longing fluently.

Mnemohistory and the myth of return

Let us linger for a moment, not on the act of returning but on the idea of it. Return, in much of its cultural packaging, is less a logistical event and more a plot device. A narrative arc. A closing of the circle. The prodigal daughter returns, her suitcase full of knowledge and guilt, to restore balance to a disrupted home. She is welcomed (or judged) but either way, she *completes* something. At least that's the myth.

But as Assmann (1995) reminds us, memory does not recall the past *as it was*. It reconstructs the past *as it is useful* in the present. This is the crux of *mnemohistory* ... not history as a chronological account of fact but history as an active, affective process of remembering, forgetting, instrumentalising. Mnemohistory, a term Assmann developed through his studies of cultural memory, treats memory as an ongoing negotiation between experience, identity, meaning. In mnemohistory, the past is never settled; it is curated, staged, sometimes wholly fabricated to serve present desires.

Return migration is ripe with mnemohistorical fantasies. It is imagined less as a material act and more as a symbolic one. It promises redemption, resolution and homecoming: all the tidy emotional tropes of a bildungsroman but with real-life implications for those who must live through it. For women this narrative often takes on the air of a gendered teleology: she departs in pursuit of education, economic gain or escape. She returns not to pick up where she left off but to *become who she was always meant to be*: the nurturing daughter, the cultural custodian, the keeper of ancestral memory. A migratory Cinderella, now fit for her role.

This is what Halbwachs (1992) called *collective memory*: the socially framed recollection that lives not in individual minds but in institutions, rituals, shared languages. Through collective memory, communities remember not what happened but what *should have* happened. Return in this formulation, becomes a moral fable, rehearsed in family dinners and community WhatsApp groups: *She went abroad and learned everything but still came back to care for her parents. She never forgot who she was.*

Mnemohistory thrives in these retellings. It doesn't need accuracy; it needs *resonance*. As Ricoeur (2010) notes in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, memory always sits at the unstable boundary between what is remembered, what is narrated, what is erased. He distinguishes between memory as *faithful recollection* (*mémoire fidèle*) and memory as

manipulated or instrumentalised recollection (mémoire manipulée). Return migration (especially as it intersects with national or community identities) leans heavily on the latter. The returnee is rarely allowed her own narrative. She is absorbed into the mnemonic machinery.

Consider for example, state-funded 'return' programmes that offer financial incentives to migrant women if they engage in community revitalisation projects, domestic work or caregiving sectors. These are economic opportunities and also moral assignments. The state remembers her as daughter-of-the-soil, never mind if she left as a queer artist or a computer programmer. *Return* is not her decision; it's her destiny.

Migration bureaucracy itself can function as a myth-making apparatus. Official forms ask: 'Reason for return?' as if the returnee must perform intentionality. Boxes are ticked: *Family Reunification, Marriage, End of Work Contract*. There is rarely an option for *Spectral Longing* or *Inherited Melancholia*. Bureaucracy, that blunt tool of the state, flattens the haunted textures of return into administrative legibility. But even this flattening sustains the myth: it presumes return is something planned, rational, conclusive.

Yet, as we've already seen in *postmemory* (Hirsch, 1997, 2012), the memory that animates return is often fragmentary, second-hand and affectively charged. This disconnect between official narratives and lived psychic experience creates a crisis of recognition. The returnee woman may not recognise the place she's returned to, nor may it recognise her.

Still the rituals persist. Homecomings are staged like miniature weddings: family members gather at airports with flowers and posters. Meals are cooked that haven't been eaten in years. Dresses are ironed that were last worn at farewell parties. Photos are taken as proof of return, to be posted and circulated in diasporic networks. These rituals serve not just to welcome but to remind: *This is your home. You belong here. You've always belonged here.*

But belonging like memory, is never neutral. It is always conditioned. Anderson's (1983) concept of *imagined communities* reminds us that national belonging is a construct maintained through symbols, narratives, selective remembering. The returnee woman is slotted into a national imagination where she plays the role of loyal daughter, tradition-bearer or sacrificial symbol. Rarely is she allowed to return with disillusionment, ambivalence or refusal. Her emotional palette must match the mood board of the myth.

Even community pressure plays a role. In many return contexts, local gossip functions as a moral ledger. Neighbours keep track: *Did she bring money? Did she bring shame? Is she marrying local or foreign?* These micro-surveillances uphold the myth of return as not just desirable but righteous. The returnee woman becomes a stage upon which others project their anxieties, hopes, mnemonic investments. Her body is not just a site of return; it is a screen for other people's dreams.

And what of refusal? What happens when she says, 'This is not my home'? Mnemo-history has little space for this kind of narrative break. To refuse the myth of return is often read as betrayal. Yet perhaps refusal is its own kind of remembering: a remembering of histories that do not resolve into redemption arcs, that do not come home tidy.

Perhaps the truest return is not geographic but epistemic: a return to the messy, contradictory, multiple ways of being that history often tries to smooth over. Perhaps return

is not to a place but to a question: *What is being asked of me when I return?* And who does the asking?

In that sense, mnemohistory is about the past and also about power. About who gets to narrate return, who is allowed to forget, who must carry the myth like unpaid emotional labour. The returnee woman becomes a subject of memory and a *medium* for it ... a vessel into which the community pours its longing, nostalgia, unfulfilled promises.

Re-membering home: the feminised labour of return

Returning, it turns out, is a lot of work.

Not just the packing, the visas, the awkward airport goodbyes. No, I'm talking about the labour that begins after the landing: the unseen graft of stitching memory to material, desire to disappointment, myth to mess. And more often than not, that stitching is done by women.

Return, for many women, is not a homecoming. It is a *re-membering* ... a putting-back-together of things fragmented by time, distance, generational expectation. The home she is told she is returning to doesn't really exist; instead, she must make it exist, retroactively. And this process, of aligning memory with reality, of smoothing out the contradictions between longing and the here-and-now, requires labour. Emotional labour. Domestic labour. Symbolic labour. Labour that is rarely recognised, let alone remunerated.

This is the 'double burden' writ large. As feminist migration scholars like Kofman (2000) and Raghuram and Kofman (2004) have long argued, migrant women often straddle two worlds: expected to be economically productive in host countries while remaining emotionally and culturally anchored to their places of origin. Upon return, this duality doesn't disappear; it multiplies. The returnee woman is not just *back*. She is tasked with making others feel that *nothing has changed*. She becomes the emotional seamstress of national continuity.

This process echoes what Hochschild (2012) described as *emotional labour*: the work of managing feelings to produce a desired emotional state in others. But here it's transposed onto a cultural plane. She must manage nostalgia, contain disappointment, radiate gratitude. Her performance of return must be legible and reassuring to others. And as Ahmed (2010) might remind us, these emotions don't just reside inside her; they *stick* to her. They circulate, attach, do affective work within the collective. Her smiling face at the welcome-home dinner is not just a personal gesture; it is a political act of affective alignment.

But let's be clear: this is not a blank slate. She is not arriving to re-decorate a neutral space. Home itself is haunted: full of inherited memories, unspoken expectations and spectral residues. To return is to enter a space thick with what Gordon (2008) calls *haunting*: the ghostly presence of social violence that refuses to be buried. That old bedroom, freshly painted for her arrival, holds the scent of what was never resolved. The kitchen table where family meals are now served bears the marks of arguments, secrets, ungrieved griefs. What returns alongside her is not just luggage but *the unresolved*.

And what does she do with these ghosts? In many cases, she is expected to exorcise them: to cook them away, clean them into submission, perform rituals that smooth over the fractures. This is what Derrida (1994) in *Spectres of Marx* might describe as a

hauntological demand: the return of the past not as something concluded but as something still-to-be-negotiated. The returnee woman becomes both medium and mediator ... communing with inherited wounds, speaking in tongues of care, offering up herself as a site of reconciliation.

This labour is not just emotional; it is very material. Take for instance, the pressure to renovate the family house. 'Make it livable again'. 'Modernise it'. 'Bring the outside world in but not too much'. Domestic space becomes a contested zone, where design decisions are loaded with symbolic meaning. To paint a wall is to make a claim about temporality. To throw away old furniture is to risk erasing lineage. To rearrange the kitchen is to disorient the ghost of mother or grandmother.

In this sense, return is also performance. And here, Taylor's (2003) distinction between the *archive* and the *repertoire* becomes especially useful. The *archive* stores the visible, the documented, the fixed: passports, birth certificates, property deeds. The *repertoire* carries embodied, ephemeral knowledge: gestures, habits, rituals, recipes. The returnee woman is almost always called upon to restore the *repertoire*: to perform the past not as it was, but as it ought to be remembered. She is expected to speak the forgotten dialect, cook her grandmother's exact stew, remember how to kneel just so during ancestral rites. In this space, memory is not just personal; it is theatrical. And the audience is watching closely.

What happens when she cannot perform? Or refuses to? When she fumbles the prayer or reuses old Tupperware instead of serving dishes? These small deviations are often read as failures: not just of womanhood but of loyalty. 'She's forgotten her roots', they say. But what they really mean is: 'She didn't do the remembering for us'.

This is where the symbolic labour becomes most pronounced. As Varzi (2006) has shown in her ethnographic work on post-revolutionary Iran, memory is not just personal; it is nationalised. The returnee woman by virtue of her embodied presence, becomes a site through which the nation re-narrates itself. Her body is tasked with reconciling the fractures between past and present, tradition and modernity, absence and return. She is not just returning home; she *is* home, remade.

And yet this labour remains unaccounted. It does not appear in remittance reports or returnee reintegration statistics. Policy documents speak of 'skills transfer' and 'knowledge exchange' but rarely of the quiet psychic work of reconciling who you've become with who you are expected to be. Anderson (2000) and Mohanty (2003) remind us that migrant women's labour is often rendered invisible precisely because it is seen as natural, moral, familial. Return migration discourse, similarly, launders this labour in the language of duty, love, cultural revival.

But what if we refused that frame? What if return were not a redemptive arc but an ongoing negotiation: a practice of critical re-remembering that doesn't aim to resolve but to complicate? What if the labour of return were seen not as restoration but as *rewriting*?

Here the haunting becomes generative. The spectral as Gordon (2008) insists, is not just about what is lost; but about what remains to be done. The returnee woman in her refusals, hesitations and imperfect performances, opens a crack in the myth. A space where memory does not dictate action but invites reimagination. Where nostalgia does not prescribe roles but gestures toward other futures.

Return then, is not about arriving; it is about *rewriting the script*. Not to discard the past but to disarticulate its demands. To let the ghosts speak, yes, but not to give them the final word.

Conclusion: the return that never arrived

She steps off the bus. The same bus, the same station. Her feet touch the familiar pavement, cracked just where she remembers. The air smells like boiled peanuts, exhaust fumes and last season's rain. Her aunt greets her with arms stretched too wide and the neighbours all say: 'She's back'. But what she feels is not arrival. It is the overwhelming, dissonant sense that she is *inhabiting someone else's memory* and being asked to make it real.

But now (after all we have traversed) it's clearer. This scene was never about coming home. It was about *holding open the gap* between what was longed for and what is. Return, we now understand, is not an end-point. It is a recursive performance: a looping dance between memory and desire, nation and narration, affect and archive. It is a gendered negotiation with the past that demands presence and also *performance*. The woman who returns is not a passenger in history but its choreographer. She must move to the music of other people's memories while composing her own.

Return migration is not simply a matter of crossing borders backward. It is not the happy undoing of departure nor a neat stitching of life into 'before' and 'after'. As theorists of memory and affect from Hirsch (1997) and Boym (2001) to Ahmed (2004, p. 2010) have helped us see, the past is not something that lies behind us. It is something we *carry, project, embody*. Return is thus not a retrieval but a *relational event*: one shaped by collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992), cultural haunting (Gordon, 2008) and the affective economies of gender, care, longing.

This mnemohistorical framing asks us to take seriously how *memory is used* not merely inherited. As Assmann (1995) reminds us, collective memory is less about fidelity to fact and more about cultural function ... what is remembered *for and by whom*. The myth of return is powerful precisely because it does something: it gives coherence to diasporic identity, promises redemption for migration's costs, reinscribes women into traditional roles as cultural custodians. But when we listen more carefully (when we trace the fractures rather than the promises) we hear a different story. One of mismatch, of dissonance, of ghosts that cannot be laid to rest.

For example, among second-generation Lebanese–Venezuelan returnees, reflective nostalgia can take the form of engaging with the homeland without attempting to fully restore an idealised past (Denison, 2021). Rather than seeking seamless reintegration or a literal reconstruction of former domestic or social orders, returnees navigate the dissonances and complexities of life in Lebanon using prior experiences in Venezuela, transnational networks and adaptive strategies developed over years of mobility. These practices subvert the restorative impulse: nostalgia becomes not a conservative longing for order but a mode of critical engagement with memory, loss and belonging. Reflective nostalgia here, once again, functions as a form of ethical hesitation, allowing returnees to inhabit *memory's dissonances* without flattening them into resolution or neat narratives.

For feminist theory, this means moving beyond 'women in migration' as a demographic concern and toward *feminisation as a structure of memory*. By this, I point to

how women's multifaceted labour (feeling-based, cultural-symbolic and caretaking) performs in the moment and simultaneously organises the preservation, enactment, reinterpretation of collective memory and heritage. As Mohanty (2003) has long argued, women's experiences must not be essentialised but *historicised*: situated within the ideological, material, affective frameworks that demand from them particular kinds of labour. In the return migration context, this means recognising how affective labour (Hochschild, 2012) and memory work are entwined. Women are not just returning; they are being asked to *restore*. Not just to re-enter the home but to rebuild it as a cultural ideal, an emotional archive, a national allegory.

In migration studies, this shifts the analytic terrain. We must look not only at policies, remittances, reintegration strategies but at *rituals, stories, feelings*. What songs are sung at welcome-home dinners? What photos are shown? What silences surround the years away? These are not marginal or sentimental details. They are the material of mnemopolitics: the governance of memory and the infrastructures of belonging.

For memory studies, the implications are just as profound. The return migrant is a bearer of past experience and also a *site of mnemonic collision*. She carries the postmemory of others (Hirsch, 1997), the nostalgic scripts of state and community (Boym, 2001) and her own embodied knowing, all of which may contradict. Mnemohistory as a method, allows us to hold these contradictions without resolving them. It asks: not what 'really happened' but *why* this version of the past matters now and *to whom*.

So – what, then, is *home*?

As I asked in the introduction, what is 'return' when the home being returned to exists more in memory than in materiality? And whose memories shape that home and whose labour is required to make it livable again? Perhaps, as many have whispered across time and theory, home was never a fixed place. Maybe it is best thought of as a *verb*: something we enact, repeatedly and imperfectly, in fits and fragments. 'To home' is to remember *selectively*, to feel *ambivalently*, to negotiate *constantly*. 'To home' is to labour (emotionally, socially, physically) toward something that already feels like it should exist, because someone once said it did. In this sense, the work of return is inseparable from the work of inhabiting memory, shaping belonging, making the imagined real. In that spirit, let me close not with certainty but with an echo. A spectral list of things that *did not return*:

- The smell of grandmother's cooking, now only traceable in burnt spices and guessed-at recipes.
- The dialect half-forgotten, tripping on the tongue, corrected by children.
- The mother who aged while you were gone and now expects stories you don't know how to tell.
- The photo album, carefully preserved, that omits your queerness, your city accent, your reasons for leaving.
- The backyard tree that was cut down for a driveway.
- The childhood friend who no longer speaks your name.
- The you who left.

And yet (amid these absences) something else lingers. A gesture. A refusal. A performance. A ghost of a different future.

Because in the end, the return never arrives. But that doesn't mean it fails. It means that it *haunts, provokes, questions*. It means that it opens a space not for certainty but for reimagining. It means that we are no longer asking *how to go back* but *how to carry on* with all the contradictions still intact.

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