

Female re-writings of the Jewish diaspora: Metamemory novels and contemporary British-Jewish women writers

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Abstract

In keeping with the interdisciplinary dialogue featuring the fields of Diaspora and Memory Studies, some current fictions seem to have absorbed, reproduced and deconstructed those contemporary discourses that reflect on the complex relation between the individual and collective construction of memory in the diaspora. It is in this context that British-Jewish women authors deserve special attention since they have struggled with numerous memory tensions together with the multifarious identity factors of being Jews, immigrants (or their descendants) and women, adding their multifaceted perspectives on affiliation and belonging to the complexity that defines Jewish identity and culture. This article starts from the neurobiological notion of 'metamemory' and the idea that its study leads to understand better both memory and diasporic phenomena. Some contemporary fictional creations by British-Jewish women writers exemplify what could be defined as 'the metamemory novel'. In particular, I focus on the fictional works of some pertinent second- and third-generation British-Jewish female authors—Lisa Appignanesi's *The Memory Man* (2004), Linda Grant's *The Clothes on their Backs* (2008), and Zina Rohan's *The Small Book* (2010). Following Birgit Neumann's notion of 'fictions of metamemory' (2008a, b), I detail the key narrative

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features that configure these novels, such as polyphony, metafictionality and the blurring of time dimensions. Moreover, I study the generational bonds that are (de)constructed in these stories, thanks to Hirsch's notion of 'postmemory' (2008), which acquire healing properties for the protagonists. Finally, I conclude that the formal experimentation identified in these writings may confirm that today's Jewish female writers are resorting to literature as a platform to make their diasporic identities more dynamic.

KEYWORDS

British-Jewish women, diaspora, feminism, liminal, meta-memory, postmemory, transgenerational

1 | INTRODUCTION: DIASPORIC WRITINGS OF BRITISH-JEWISH WOMEN

It cannot be denied that "since the early 1990s, the political and cultural realities of global migration have led to a growing interest in the different forms of 'diasporic' existence and identity" (Baronian, et al., 2007, p. 9), which makes it difficult to agree on a productive definition of diaspora. In keeping with Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller's conceptualisation (2011, p. 3), diaspora should be understood as something "performative, multidimensional, plural, fluid and in constant production" (Pellicer-Ortín & Tofantshuk, 2019, p. 1). Accordingly, some current fictions seem to have absorbed, reproduced and deconstructed those contemporary discourses that reflect on the complex relation between individual and collective constructions of diasporic memory. This is mainly the case for those communities that have lived or inherited experiences of exile and migration.

Considering the intricate connections between their construction of identity and their attachment to place, mostly encountered by the descendants of Jewish migrants and/or Holocaust survivors, Jewish writers deserve special attention in this context. Most of the works produced by the second or third generations of Jewish immigrants echo a deep sense of dislocation. For instance, they often revolve around the lives of diasporic characters trying to find roots in alien lands (Jelen et al., 2011). When it comes to the case of British-Jewish writers, it was in the 1980s that many of these authors started to trace the past of their ancestors as succeeding generations of Jewish immigrants and Holocaust survivors. By that time, they began to look for the hidden memories that had configured their family (hi)stories across time, giving place to works characterised by a profound sense of displacement. When Jewish immigrants attempted to adapt to their new life in Britain, the inclusion of their culture into that of the British was not easy. This phenomenon influenced British-Jewish literature to the extent that it has been defined by its extraterritoriality and contradictory attitude towards the past (Stähler, 2007).

On this basis, British-Jewish women writers have struggled with all these tensions together with the identity factors of being Jews, émigrés (or their descendants), and women, adding their multifaceted perspectives on affiliation and belonging to the already complex Jewish identity and culture (Gilbert, 2013; Valman, 2014). Already in the 1990s, Judith R. Baskin claimed that Jewish female writers often felt the double exclusion of being "women in a male-dominated culture"; that is, they "participate as 'others' in several traditions at once" (1994, p. 21). Accordingly, the artistic creations of many present-day Jewish women writers point to the capacity of art to both negotiate their diasporic identities and demand changes within Jewish tradition. According to Claire M. Tylee (2006, pp. 12–13), although many current British-Jewish female writers "are award-winning authors who have helped to define the character of twentieth-century English literature", they have been excluded from the literary canon by others. Also, they

have 'outed' themselves from it as they have not felt completely integrated into British artistic circles. Consequently, writings by British-Jewish women are powerful sites to look for the unreported versions of history, diasporic identities and sense of femininity of a group of authors who have not received the attention they deserve. The literary creations of Anita Brookner, Elaine Feinstein, Eva Figes, Michelene Wandor, Jenny Diski, Linda Grant, Anne Karpf, Lisa Appignanesi, and Zina Rohan, among others, demonstrate that their being diasporic women has resulted in their creation of liminal works depicting memory and identity tensions.

This article starts from the neurobiological notion of metamemory with the purpose of demonstrating that some contemporary fictional creations by British-Jewish women writers exemplify what may be defined as the 'metamemory novel'. This kind of novel illustrates the troubling relationship that the second and third generations of British-Jewish women maintain with Jewish diasporic memories and identities. In order to do this, I examine the fictional works of some second- and third-generation British-Jewish female authors. In agreement with Birgit Neumann's notions of 'fictions of memory' and 'metamemory' (2008a, 2008b), I list the key features that can be distinguished in Lisa Appignanesi's *The Memory Man* (2005), Linda Grant's *The Clothes on their Backs* (2008) and Zina Rohan's *The Small Book* (2010). Moreover, I emphasise the generational bonds that are (de)constructed in these stories, thanks to Hirsch's notion of 'postmemory' (2008). Finally, I question whether the textualisation of these exilic women's metamemorial dimensions leads to a liberating view of their feminine selves as well as to a more productive performance of what diaspora means for contemporary British-Jewish women.

2 | UNDERSTANDING METAMEMORY THROUGH FICTION: THREE CASE STUDIES

The interest in metamemory has recently grown in order to explain the dissociated amnesia caused by traumatic events and the dualism between two cultures, nations and languages embodied by the migrant self. Many researchers in the field of Memory Studies have agreed that metamemory has become a scientific notion of renewed attention in the area of Neuropsychology because understanding metamemory can help us understand memory phenomena better (Dunlosky & Bjork, 2008; Hacker et al., 1998; Perfect & Schwartz, 2002; Terrace & Metcalfe, 2005). Since John H. Flavell's coining of this concept in 1970, several definitions have been proposed. We could agree with Janet Metcalfe and John Dunlosky, according to whom it relates to "the processes and structures whereby people are able to examine the contents of their memories, either prospectively or retrospectively, and make judgements or commentaries about them" (2008, p. 349).

Some current fictionalised accounts seem to echo these memory discourses. As Neumann has argued, narratological approaches assume that "not only can literature make the nexus of memory and identity the object of explicit reflections, but it can also represent this nexus implicitly [...] through a variety of semanticized forms" (2008a, p. 333). Some literary critics have proposed the term 'fictions of memory' to allude to "the stories that individuals or cultures tell about their past to answer the question 'who am I?', or, collectively, 'who are we?'" (Neumann, 2008a, p. 334). Neumann also mentions that, within these memory novels, there is a group that "problematize[s] the processes of remembering on a meta-level and foreground the ways in which memories are constructed. Such fictions of *meta-memory* [...] combine personally engaged memories with critically reflective perspectives on the functioning of memory" (2008a, p. 338, my emphasis). Thus, these novels turn the question of how we remember into the central issue.

The literary works under study in this article can be understood as paradigmatic of Neumann's concept of 'fictions of memory' and also, and primarily, of 'metamemory fictions'. Born in Poland in 1946 and having moved to Canada and France when she was a child, Lisa Appignanesi experienced the anxiety caused by being a diasporic Jew and the burden of her family's traumatic past. *The Memory Man* is a novel about a renowned neuroscientist who, after devoting all his life to investigating memory, encounters the repressed memories of his childhood, which reveal him as a Holocaust survivor. In this narrative, all the characters—neuro-scientist Bruno Lind, his adopted daughter Amelia, Polish journalist Irene Davies and the mysterious Pole Aleksander Tarski—engage in entangled memory journeys. This is not

a new topic for Appignanesi since her texts frequently deal with the way memory is transmitted across generations, mainly in the case of Jewish Holocaust survivors and their children.

Linda Grant, born in Liverpool in 1951 as a child of Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants and a grandchild of Holocaust survivors, belongs to that third generation of British-Jewish women authors who, according to Behlau and Reitz, acquired a significant position on the British literary scene in the 1990s (2004, p. 12). Her novels typically examine the role of place and memory in the construction of Jewish identities through the journeys of defiant female characters in search of identity. In *The Clothes on Their Backs*, the main character, Vivien, personifies the second-generation troubles when encountering a family past associated with trauma and diasporic alienation. The unexpected revelations of her uncle Sandor allow the reader to complete the same gap-filling process that the protagonist undergoes to comprehend her family history of migration from Hungary to London. The retrospective narration depicts a mature Vivien re-evaluating the memories that once destroyed her family unity. This process displays entangled testimonial layers that demonstrate that the line dividing good and evil is very blurry.

Zina Rohan, the daughter of Jewish refugees who was brought up in London in a very international family, emerged as a writer of fiction in the 1990s. Her works tackle issues related to migration and the representation of diasporic and transgenerational memories. *The Small Book* is a polyphonic novel that portrays the way the First World War influenced a British-Jewish family throughout the 20th century. The narrative has a circular structure. It begins with Private Hoskins' diary, telling the shocking experience of him being obliged to shoot at one of his fellows during the First World War, and finishes with his testimony, narrating how he married to this fellow's widow and lived a life full of guilt. Together with his testimony, readers bump into the voices of the other family members, crossing time and space boundaries. His daughter Pam and his grandson Roy recount some difficult times of the Second World War. Also, the narrative leads us to the present (1998), when Roy and Margaret face their aunt's death and the inheritance of some unexpected family secrets, which makes them contemplate their family roots from a new perspective.

3 | TEXTUALISING MEMORY AND METAMEMORY

Drawing on Neumann's research, some of the main narrative devices present in 'fictions of memory' are the creation of multi-temporal levels, the presence of multi-perspectival narration/focalisation, and the self-reflexive disclosure of the meaning-making process (2008a, pp. 336–7). The three novels summarised above have a multi-perspectival tone. In *The Memory Man*, a third-person, extra- and heterodiegetic, narrator leads the narration, and focalisation moves across the characters—Bruno, Irena, Amelia, and even Irena's mother offer their perspectives on the events narrated. In *The Clothes on Their Backs*, the main narrator and focaliser is Vivien Kovacs. This first-person, homodiegetic and extradiegetic, narrator begins a digression to the past that continues through to the final chapter. Yet readers meet other focalisers, mainly her uncle Sandor when he renders his testimony through the interviews she records to write his biography. *The Small Book*, meanwhile, is built on the perspectives of diverse narrators and focalisers, all of them belonging to the same family. Readers first encounter the voice of a soldier, Private Miller, during the First World War. In the section set in 1946, Pam and her nephew Roy provide their versions of the family- and war-related events in the alternated chapters they narrate. In the section set in the present, the points of view of Pam's niece, Margaret, and also Roy are provided. This alternation of voices continues until Part 6, set in 1945, where the narrators and focalisers are both Roy and Margaret's fictitious grandfather, who is revealed as Miller's killer. The combination of perspectives in these three cases suggests that the reconstruction of painful events can only be achieved by incorporating the voices of all the different agents implied in them.

In keeping with this, Neumann alludes to internal focalisation, mainly from a child's perspective, as a recurrent mechanism in metamemory fictions (2008b, p. 142). In Appignanesi's case, the child focaliser plays a vital role, as readers have access to the chapters containing his digressions to the war years through his childish eyes. For instance, his childlike reactions to the exclusion he suffered at the Polish school due to his Jewish roots are rendered as follows: "He had never thought much about being a Jew until some of the boys in school had made it an issue"

(Appignanesi, 2005, p. 74). Sometimes, the narration even signals the rupture between the child who witnessed some traumatic events during the Holocaust and the adult who repressed their memories. In this way, the adult focaliser elaborates such metamemorial reflections as the following: “young Bruno had not known when he returned to Przemysl in that autumn of 1940 that in a few brief months, his boy's-own-story sense of the war would be thrust backward to a period of the war's innocence. [...] That their murderous battle against the Jews had only just begun” (p. 119). Dunlosky and Bjork (2008) claim that the capacity of being able to tell the difference between remembering and knowing is usually damaged when an individual has experienced some degree of trauma. This is even more so when this happens during the person's childhood. Thus, Bruno's thoughts illustrate the destruction of his metamemorial capacity to distinguish between the knowledge of these horrific events and his remembrance of them.

In Grant's novel, we do not find a child's focalisation but a retrospective one. The narrator-focaliser tries to remember the way she felt when she was young. At that time she could not come to terms with her background as a descendant of foreign Hungarian-Jews living in Britain, as she says: “What I remember, when I think back, is not a childhood [...], and so the liking of words was born in me, an immigrant trait. I was trying to puzzle out the many mysteries of my simple existence” (Grant, 2008, p. 18). Throughout the narrative, she avoids the child and adolescent who lived those moments to acquire a distinctive voice. This aspect may suggest that the narrator-focaliser has not been able to incorporate those difficult memories into her adult life story. She can return to her past and evaluate it from an adult perspective, but she does not render the experience through the eyes of the child she was because those memories have been repressed.

In Rohan's case, the child focaliser mainly appears in Parts 2 and 4, where the photos in Roy's exhibition are described using the present tense, as if the past events were repeated over and over inside the picture frame. Yet the focaliser acquires an adult voice when the protagonists reflect on their own metamemory abilities, as Roy does in the following episode: “A photographic retrospective means looking back, thinking back [...]. It's remembering. It's fishing out what you thought you'd forgotten” (Rohan, 2010, pp. 79–82). In fact, the main characters' visit to the exhibition rendered at the heart of the novel—where Pam, Roy and Margaret discuss the family pictures together—repeats a similar process to the one they undergo throughout the narrative. They are brought together so as to reflect on their traumatic memory pieces.

Moreover, these three books are constructed on multi-temporal levels. In *The Memory Man*, this is reflected in the structure of the novel. Section one is entitled “Present Tense”, as it revolves around the moment when Bruno returns to the city of his birth (Vienna) for a memory conference. Part two is titled “Past Perfect”, where the chapters swap between the years of the war and the present, indicating that Bruno's traumatic past keeps haunting his adult life. The third part is “Past Historic”, referring to the memories that Bruno has repressed throughout his life and which finally come to the surface when he visits the places of his childhood. The final part, “Return”, revolves around the last years of the war and ends in the present, when secrets relevant to the characters' lives are unveiled. Grant's novel starts and finishes in present London, but readers discover a wide array of digressions: from the year Vivien was born, her childhood, adolescence and her tragic marriage, to her parents' story of migration from Budapest to England, and to the revelation of her family's history back in Hungary before, during and after the war. Rohan also relies on the principle of temporal juxtaposition in travelling from the First World War to the Second, leading up to the end of the 20th century, while returning to events that happened during the main characters' adolescence.

In addition, the process of narrative mediation is constant in these works. In Appignanesi's novel, this is evident from the title of the novel to the course of collective memory construction undergone by the characters. In Grant's writing, this mediation is obvious in the creation of different narrative frames. There is a first narrative level, constructed when Vivien goes back to the neighbourhood of her childhood as an adult. And her digression gives place to more testimonial layers, introducing a narration within a narration in the form of testimonies and interviews. This mediation is more visible in the chapters that include Sandor's testimony. Vivien sometimes depicts what he thinks as an omniscient narrator. She also includes her personal reflections on his testimony when she summarises what he has been telling her (Grant, 2008, p. 168). However, on other occasions, he acts as the focaliser, revealing the past as he lived it (Grant, 2008, p. 102). Finally, Sandor acquires his voice in the penultimate chapter, where the beginning of the book

he had started to write before his death is included: "People talked about what I represented, but no one understood what it was to be me" (Grant, 2008, p. 282). Mediation can also be observed in the title of Rohan's work. It includes a metatextual reference to the historical diaries found by Margaret recounting the last days of their grandfather, which was also entitled "the Small Book" (2010, p. 193).

I focus now on other features of metamemory novels that are not explicitly highlighted by Neumann. In the first place, these works represent the consequences of some hidden trauma disclosed throughout the narrative. In keeping with Trauma Studies, Roger Luckhurst defines trauma as "something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes" (2006, p. 499). This definition focuses on the belatedness of the traumatic experience, which often gives way to the process of 'repetition compulsion', that is, the traumatic re-enactment of the initial shock. Following Freudian notions, Dominick LaCapra has explained that there is usually an initial 'period of latency' between the traumatic event and the beginning of the acting-out process (2001, pp. 81, 89), which is often activated by a 'deferred action' that activates the memory of the initial shock (Freud, 2001). These notions echo in *The Memory Man*. The 'deferred action' takes place when Bruno arrives in Vienna and hears a name associated with his childhood. This name triggers some acting-out symptoms, which culminate in Bruno collapsing in front of his childhood home. Yet the major moment of traumatic disclosure happens when readers discover that, in 1942, Bruno witnessed Nazi soldiers shooting his mother and sister. The young focaliser recounts how his reaction was one of paralysis: "He wanted to say some prayer, sing some song. But nothing came to him, [...] Then he covered the graves and lay down beside them. He hoped he would never have to wake" (Appignanesi, 2005, p. 178), followed by the repression of this traumatic event. In Vivien's case, her parents hid the Holocaust and even the fact that she had an uncle. Thus, their wanting to forget led to her lack of knowledge and feeling of paralysis: "Until I was 10 I was completely unaware that I had a relative. [...] I couldn't speak, I couldn't move" (Grant, 2008, pp. 22–23). One of the most relevant moments in *The Clothes on Their Backs* occurs when Vivien decides to find out about her uncle, and this search unveils all the family secrets: "Suddenly, a treasure chest had opened and out spilled all these precious objects. I was full of everything my uncle had told me" (Grant, 2008, p. 95). As a second-generation Holocaust survivor, Vivien admits that she had been avoiding the history of Hungarians until her encounters with her uncle reveal the past that had been denied to her:

'What happened to your grandparents in Mád?'

'Up the chimney, of course, what else?'

'And Berta's family?'

'The same.'

So this was the big silence that had deadened my childhood. I understood a little better. How could any of it be spoken, and to a child? My parents held it all inside them, like their own blood.

(Grant, 2008, p. 174)

This discovery changed her relationship with her parents and her understanding of their world for good. Rather than the discovery of trauma, *The Small Book* is based on the revealing of family secrets that Margaret and Roy have to connect when Pam dies. In this novel, all the characters have gone through some traumatic war experiences linked across time and space, and the emphasis lies on their forgetting as a survival mechanism. As Roy says: "'My father died, and my mother lost her marbles over it. I'm told. I don't remember it'. 'Not at all?' 'Absolutely nothing'" (Rohan, 2010, p. 73).

In the second place, the explicit use of theories within the fields of Memory, Trauma and Holocaust Studies turns these novels into meta-reflections on memory discourses. In *The Memory Man*, the novel explores the interconnection between individual and collective memories by setting individual memory agents (the main characters) against historical memory sites in Poland. At the same time, the narrator accesses Bruno's thoughts on the topic of memory by introducing explicit terms from neurobiology when, for example, he wonders about the nature of "flashbulb memo-

ries" (Appignanesi, 2005, p. 39). Moreover, the novel transmits the message that the suffering endured during the Nazi regime was not exclusively Jewish. In this regard, Irena fosters Michael Rothberg's principles about the multidirectionality of memory when she reflects on a cyclical history of hatred and racism. According to Rothberg (2009), the multidirectional model of memory fosters connections between diverse traumatic events since all of them have instigated prejudicial suffering to various minority groups. This is evident, for instance, when Irena says: "You never walked except to step over bodies. Turks against Poles, against Austrians, Russians against Poles against Turks against Prussians, Hungarians against Romanians against Bulgarians, Lats and Liths and Ruthenians and Moravians and Bohemians and Slovaks and Lemks and Czechs and Croats and Serbs" (Appignanesi, 2005, p. 52). The same happens in *The Clothes on Their Backs*, where we find constant references to the individual act of remembering, mainly through Sandor's account of historical episodes, in parallel to its collective and historical dimensions, provided by the documents Vivien investigates in the library. She also refers to traumatic symptoms when she describes some of Sandor's war consequences, mainly Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Furthermore, multidirectional memory appears through references to the time of the interviews, when the skinheads were persecuting Black people in England, establishing parallelisms between the racism suffered by the Jews in the past and the Blacks in England in the 1970s. In *The Small Book*, echoes from Trauma and Memory Studies are also present. Margaret uses psychological terms when referring to their grandfather's experiences, after having written her PhD on soldiers' war memories. In addition, Pam and Margaret display a political discourse when they describe their militancy in the Communist Party. Again, multidirectional memory appears when Margaret connects the British campaign to pardon all the soldiers executed during the First World War to the Yugoslavian wars in the 1990s.

In the third place, the presence of metafictional features characterises these fictions, which reflect on how memories are formed and fictionalized. These are metamemory novels because the narrative form echoes the content. The rupture in formal terms emulates the rupture in the psychological processes undergone when the subjects' metamemory capacity has been disturbed. In Appignanesi's novel, the disclosure of Bruno's (hi)story mirrors the recovery of his metamemory capacity by integrating the distant knowledge of the Holocaust into his life narrative. In *The Clothes on Their Backs*, when Sandor and Vivien discuss what should be included when writing a memoir, they are symbolically discussing what and how we remember when re-evaluating our lives: "'I have many memories', he said, 'That's what I'm writing, I want to put everything down, so there's a record, so they will know'. 'They?' 'The world, of course, and any other interested party'" (Rohan, 2010, p. 71). In addition, when they reflect on the structure of his memoir, they point out the way metamemory organises our memories.

Finally, some of these novels illustrate the usual clash between scientific and literary discourses when it comes to understanding the way traumatic memories work. Moreover, they reveal that the association between these different disciplines can help us comprehend how traumatic events are remembered and forgotten. This is achieved through, for example, the figure of Bruno: the memory man. His attachment to the field of memory is initially scientific and professional; however, it later becomes personal and emotional. Bruno reaches the end of his memory quest by accepting that his scientific connection to memory has not prevented him from the issues encountered when internalising the painful episodes of his childhood. In fact, it is his final openness to other ways of looking at memory that allows him to establish emotional connections with his land and daughter. In *The Clothes on Their Backs*, Vivien's attempt at writing her uncle's biography also exemplifies the way writing practices can act as a memory recovery, and even healing, tool.

4 | TRANSGENERATIONAL AND DIASPORIC (DIS)CONNECTIONS

Transgenerational negotiations become essential for the conciliation of the traumatic memories represented in these three novels. Memory becomes alive in the diverse places visited—physically or spiritually—by the characters, and thus these sites acquire individual, familial and historical interpretations. This supports Jonathan Boyarin's argumentation about the multilayered dimension of memory, which "cannot be strictly individual, inasmuch as it is symbolic and hence intersubjective. Nor it can be literally collective, since it is not superorganic but embodied" (1994, p. 26). The textu-

alisation of this blurring of layers in these novels exemplifies the way in which contemporary fiction “may provide a place capable of reflecting on the very debates through which memorials to the past take shape” (Black, 2011, p. 60). This is particularly the case for Jewish diasporic communities since, according to Ruth Gilbert, “Jews need memory, transmitted through families, to substitute for the breaks and fissures resulting from a collective history that has been marked by repeated geographical and cultural displacements” (2013, p. 26).

The process of memory textualisation and spatialisation prevails in the three works under discussion. In *The Memory Man*, the spatialisation of traumatic memories is necessary for the protagonist to unbury them. This is illustrated, for example, in the following words: “Only if he put the boy into three dimensions plus time, saw him from the back and all around and moving, did his, yes, pleasurable sense of adventure seem incredible to the old Bruno” (Appignanesi, 2005, p. 118). Bruno’s trip to the Polish land of his Jewish past initiates the reconstruction of his memories and, as I have explained before, it “culminates in the visit to his father’s unmarked grave in the concentration camp. [This demonstrates that] these journeys are made of various entangled layers that complicate the processes of memory ‘excavation’” (Pellicer-Ortín, 2020, p. 10). A similar process of excavating memories appears in *The Clothes on Their Backs*, where Vivien’s return to the family house in Benson Court leads the protagonist to revisit her memories: “I let myself in. Silence. Dust. Smells. Memory. [...] By Friday, everything would be gone. All traces of my parents and their nearly 60-year residence of these four rooms would vanish under coats of new paint” (Grant, 2008, pp. 11–12). The same happens in *The Small Book*, in which the family house reunites the three generations of the family in Roy’s mind: “I get this idea in my mind of a portrait I might put together, three generations in one frame, but two of them never met. Somewhere at the Pile I’ve got a snapshot of our mum and dad. [...] [T]hey’re in the living room, our living room, here in this flat” (Rohan, 2010, p. 165).

Furthermore, the socio-cultural meanings of these conflictive memories emanate from the relationships with place depicted. The problematic Jewish bonds with the land (Sicher, 2005) are revisited in Appignanesi’s and Grant’s novels. In *The Memory Man*, the process of reconciliation is achieved through the protagonist’s re-attachment to the motherland. Furthermore, the revision of these bonds leads Amelia, Bruno’s adopted black daughter, to become part of the Jewish community. This is her way of feeling connected with other diasporic subjects who suffered the consequences of racism and alienation, like her. For example, it is said that “Amelia had decided to join a temple. She had decided to become Jewish, [...] because the Jews knew deep down about the workings of a prejudice” (Appignanesi, 2005, p. 43). In *The Clothes on Their Backs*, Vivien does not define herself as a Jew due to her lack of a personal relation to that notion; however, she starts to understand the meanings of Jewishness through Sandor. He represents the contradictory feelings of many Jews during and after the Holocaust, rejecting their Jewish roots to survive. This issue becomes especially pertinent when, at the end, even though Vivien does not consider herself as a Jew, she takes recourse to Jewish symbolism to reflect on her uncle’s death: “The Talmud says nine hundred and 30 kinds of death were created in the world. The most difficult is diphtheria, the easiest is a kiss. [...] The nine hundred and 31st was created for my uncle. He died of his own eye” (Grant, 2008, p. 277). This episode narrates how Sandor suffers from several heart attacks after stabbing Vivien’s boyfriend when he sees a swastika tattooed on his back. The fact that this is told by alluding to the Talmud advocates that it may be difficult to erase the Jewish identity and culture in the following generations, even if they, like Vivien, try to distance themselves from it.

In keeping with this, these three novels epitomise the discontinuity that characterises diasporic narratives, not only through the complex relationships with place but also through the recreation of generational conflicts. The children of trauma survivors in general and Holocaust survivors in particular usually face contradictions between their desire to forget their families’ past and their moral duty to remember it. Following Efraim Sicher’s argumentation, the second generation “bears the scar without the wound” (1998, p. 27) and, thus, needs to impose some meaning on that inherited “burden” (p. 35). Critics including Hirsch (2008), Meera Atkinson (2017), Sicher (1998, 2005) and Van Alphen (2006) have explained that the second generation often act as the recipients of their ancestors’ traumatic and diasporic memories and of the collective memory of the Holocaust. Thus, even though they long to establish a strong connection with their predecessors, they tend to feel alienated from their relatives. They have problems with feeling related to their difficult experiences, as they did not witness them.

These conflicts are obvious in *The Memory Man*, mainly between Bruno and his daughter. Amelia's sudden appearance in Vienna triggers Bruno's return to the past when she insists on visiting the family house. She is a clear example of transgenerational haunting, as she says: "Even if you don't talk about it, it's there. It's there in your silences, in your gestures, in the odd things that make you angry. [...] I want you to take me to Auschwitz" (Appignanesi, 2005, pp. 124–125). During this trip, readers witness her difficulty in understanding her father as well as her contradictory urges between wanting to know and deny the family history. However, in the end, Amelia becomes a guardian of her father's memory, following what Hirsch has defined as "the generation of postmemory" (2008). This concept highlights the disconnection between the survivors and their progeny as it

reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture. [...] [P]ostmemory is not a movement, method, or idea; I see it, rather, as a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove.

(Hirsch, 2008, p. 106)

A similar process is identified in Grant's main character, who starts a journey to revisit the past once her father has died. Her parents never allowed her to ask questions; however, some tensions were always present in their family. Vivien repeatedly alludes to the feelings of disconnection with her parents: "until his death at the age of 86, I felt I was a stranger to my father—I don't mean he didn't love me, I know he did, but the limited means he had of expressing any form of affection had to find their way" (Grant, 2008, p. 53). Nevertheless, the more she comes to know about the family history, the more she empathises with her parents' suffering. The transgenerational negotiation of Jewish identity is not the focus of *The Small Book* but, as I have said elsewhere, it revolves around the traumas caused by an unfortunate chain of traumatic deaths. These traumatic experiences were first inherited by Pam and Bill and later by Roy and Margaret, producing a family history full of gaps that Roy and his sister try to put together (Pellicer-Ortín, 2021). On the one hand, the consequences of the First World War firing squads produced a gap and "a trauma-induced vulnerability" at the heart of Roy and Margaret's family, which would never be fully healed. Yet, on the other hand, *The Small Book* proves that what bonds this family is this "shared vulnerability", which is textualised through the characters' explicit "awareness of their interconnectedness and their need to empathise with the previous generations' traumas" (Pellicer-Ortín, 2021, p. 349).

In fact, the depiction of this shared and transgenerational vulnerability is common to these three works. All of them address the difficulties of later generations in coming to terms with their inherited diasporic memories. Therefore, the main characters' journeys to the land and past of their ancestors, physically in Bruno's case and spiritually for Vivien, Roy and Margaret, represents the journeys embodied by many contemporary British-Jewish writers who are "concerned about the extent of their ignorance about themselves". Thus, they contribute to shaping a contemporary post-war Jewish literature inhabited by protagonists who are usually "characterized by their insatiable desire to acknowledge, advertise and *explain* their Jewishness" (Brauner, 2001, p. 35, original emphasis).

5 | CONCLUSION: DIASPORIC JEWISH WOMEN WRITERS IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

Applying the previous ideas to the specific case of female writers, both the authors and their protagonists endorse some of the argumentation promoted by today's Jewish feminist thinkers demanding new conceptions of the Jewish woman inside and outside religious circles. If Jewish feminist thinkers (e.g. Hartman, 2007; Las, 2015; Ross, 2000) try to reconcile the fact that Jewish women tend to assume a role that excludes them from social spheres yet hands them the responsibility of keeping the family together, these novels open the door to more influential female roles in the Jewish decoding and transmission of memory. In many of the novels written by British-Jewish women, we find that

the theme of the family plays an important role. For instance, their works frequently trace Jewish families through several generations. The female characters appear as fighting to reconcile their Jewish and female identities, and the Jewish family becomes a scene either of conflict or of happy continuation (Tylee, 2006, p. 17). *The Memory Man*, *The Clothes on their Backs* and *The Small Book* depict women for whom the family is not one or the other. They become active members of their family units as well as acquire explicit power over their metamemory capacities. Through a process of assimilation, bonding and reflection, Amelia manages to turn the traumatic memories inherited from her father into a feeling of communion with the diasporic Jewish community. Vivien is the main agent in decoding Sandor's metamemory capacities, and this newly acquired capacity helps her accept her own traumatic family history. Moreover, Margaret succeeds in filling in some of the missing gaps in her family's memories through her research and her personal experiences.

Near the turn of the century, Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Margie Wolfe complained that "for many Jewish women today, there is a keen sense of loss, of the lack of our own female history, heritage and traditions. We have few role models from the past; our achievements and contributions as Jewish women have rarely been acknowledged" (1998, p. 11). Nevertheless, this situation seems to have changed in the first decade of the 21st century with the creation of such potent female memory agents as those analysed in this study. These characters can inspire other diasporic women struggling with the rendering of their complex memory and metamemory abilities. Furthermore, these novels not only textualise the problematic memorialising phenomena characterising the turn of the century, but they also disclose how these complex memories are generationally transmitted and how this transmission may have a conciliatory effect. This effect can also reach the reader if we follow Neumann's ideas that novels like these show an ethical attitude towards remembering, combining "personally engaged memories with critically reflexive perspectives on the functioning of memory, thus rendering the question of how we remember the central content of the remembered itself" (2008b, p. 138). In conclusion, in our global and interconnected world, such metamemory novels as those analysed in this article offer a fruitful space to negotiate lived and/or inherited experiences of displacement and trauma. They open the door to new avenues of discussion on the role that memory and metamemory play in the definition of the contemporary (female) diasporic self.

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