

## The Lebanese Bubble in Paris: Diasporic Identity and Memory in *Beyrouth-sur-Seine* by Sabyl Ghoussoub

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### Abstract

*This article discusses how diaspora identity is reconstructed through memory in Sabyl Ghoussoub's novel Beyrouth-sur-Seine. The study examines the lived experiences of Kaïssar and Hanane, Lebanese refugees who immigrated to Paris. This research asks how everyday practices are mediated as a space for negotiating identity, rather than merely memorialising the past. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and Homi K. Bhabha's theories of cultural hybridity and the third space, this article argues that memory in the novel acts as a generative and productive force, one that allows characters to inhabit an in-between space where Lebanese and French elements are constantly negotiated and infused with new meanings. This research applies qualitative text analysis through close reading of the novel's narrative structure, spatial descriptions, and domestic rituals. The study finds that domestic space and cultural practices, spanning both material and affective dimensions of life, act as a micro-political space of resilience. Through these everyday acts, Kaïssar and Hanane transform the experience of exile into a generative third space, reconstructing a diasporic identity that moves beyond both nostalgia and trauma. This reading contributes to contemporary discussions on migration by foregrounding the affective and intimate labour that sustains and reconfigures diasporic identities in everyday life.*

**Keywords:** diaspora; identity; memory; Lebanese

### Article information

Received:  
February 3,  
2026

Revised:  
March 29,  
2026

Accepted:  
April 6,  
2026

### Introduction

The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) is regarded as one of the darkest chapters in modern Middle Eastern history (Abouzeid et al.,

2021). This armed conflict began between Christian and Muslim groups and it developed into a civil war which involved regional and international powers (Aras, 2024). An estimated 90,000 to 150,000 people were killed

in the war and many more have been injured. About 600,000 lost their homes and around 250,000 fled and were exiled, of whom many never returned (Makdisi et al., 2005). On paper, these statistics are staggering, but they do not record all the losses that took place.

The war persisted in the stories and the silence of the families. Lebanese writers have tried to make sense of this time. Writers such as Hanan al-Shaykh and Ghada al-Samman wrote about the fracture of mind and soul left by the war (Zinhom, 2024). Additionally, Hoda Barakat, through her work *The Stone of Laughter*, also talks about how violence found its way into the quotidian of people after the war. Their own ways of thinking were marked by the fighting, even after its end. The trauma is remembered and reworked because literary works offer a place for memory (Alkabani, 2019).

The memory of this war cannot be disconnected from its gender angles. In Lebanese literature, war tends to be seen through the eyes of women and the feminine experience (Hassine, 2022). Female writers have depicted the sense of reconstruction, of rebuilding on ruins, of grasping truth among lost and erased memories (Al-Mousa, 2020; Azeez & Benny, 2024). Outside of the literature realm, documentaries such as *Lanterns of Memory* by Jean Chamoun and Mai Masri put forward women as guardians of the memory of this war (Brittain, 2020). Visual arts and performances are also an important space for processing the past, providing alternative remembrance and reinterpretation of war (Adami, 2017; Sakhi et al., 2024). Memory is therefore discussed, staged, and revisited.

Exile and displacement are often discussed in Lebanese literature. For those who were displaced, the war did not end in 1990. The war chased after them. Rawi Hage's 2008 novel *Cockroach* is a study of the psychic burden of exile and alienation, a burden that persists long after physical migration (Massaad, 2020). Rabih Alameddine's novels also contemplate questions of hybridity and belonging, the struggle between assimilation and the looming shadow of a war-torn past (Altwaiji & Alwuraafi, 2021). In these works,

exile is not just geographic. It has emotional, linguistic, and even corporeal dimensions.

It is in this context that we can situate Sabyl Ghoussoub's novel *Beyrouth-sur-Seine* (2022). Ghoussoub, born in Paris in 1988 to Lebanese parents, is of a generation that lives through the consequences of war from afar. His previous novel, *Le Nez Juif* (2018), dwells on what it meant to be a young Arab Parisian in the contemporary world, a version of himself who was between France and Lebanon.

*Beyrouth-sur-Seine*, which won the 2022 Prix Goncourt des Lycéens, more explicitly mines family history, featuring the same conflicts between generations and the frustrations that his parents' inevitable inheritance causes. It is his parents' story: that of Kaïssar and Hanane, who, newly married, left Lebanon to move to Paris in 1975. The move is intended to be temporary; Kaïssar will continue his studies, and they will soon return home. And yet their departure turned into permanent exile when war broke out.

Their story, as remembered by their son, is neither entirely documentary nor fictional. It is told through a mixture of interviews, postcards, photographs, letters, and poetry, where the style is almost wilfully disjointed; the memories they have do not form a tidy timeline. Kaïssar, an intellectual and left-wing journalist, found the dissonance between his political ideals and the compromises that exile forced him to make intolerable. Hanane wanted to remember Lebanon differently, by cooking, cleaning and talking on the telephone. From their flat in Paris, they recreate a Lebanese bubble: a small, controlled place in which the outside is kept, as much as possible, at arm's length. Language, food, and memories are carefully guarded.

Research on *Beyrouth-sur-Seine* largely emphasises how the novel addresses intercultural identity and memory. Belmokhtar (2024) analyses the novel as a negotiation between Lebanese and French cultural frameworks, highlighting its autobiographical elements and broader reflections on identity in the context of globalisation. Zdrada-Cok (2023) focuses on

its hybrid narrative mode, comparing it to Mohammed Aïssaoui's *Les Funambules*, and analyses how journalistic discourse blends with literary techniques. Meanwhile, Gręda (2024) who places this novel alongside Boualem Sansal's *Rue Darwin*, highlights the complexity of identity formation in a postcolonial and migratory context shaped by colonial legacies and cultural hybridity.

Other studies read the novel through the prism of writing as catharsis. Issa (2024) sustains that Ghoussoub's return to the themes of war and exile is a form of personal meditation and collective witnessing, but also unveils a burden of dual belonging. On the other hand, Al Jarrah (2023) situates this novel in the context of the current Lebanese crisis, suggesting that Ghoussoub revisits the civil war not as a given historical past, but as an unresolved issue that is transmitted in the very fabric of diaspora life. Finally, Brones (2024) foregrounds photography, reading the family archive of photos as a visual tension between Paris and Beirut, a material trace of a disjoint experience that breaks down the borders between the past and the present.

Despite the abundance of literature on the Lebanese diaspora and the civil war, little is known about how personal and familial memories operate as mechanisms for identity reconstruction in situations of forced exile. Therefore, the research question of this article is: How does memory operate as a mechanism for identity reconstruction in a situation of exile within the Lebanese diaspora, as represented in *Beyrouth-sur-Seine*?

While existing scholarship on memory studies has examined the role of personal and collective memory in diasporic identities, much of the literature has focused on trauma and nostalgia without fully exploring how memory operates as an active and transformative force in shaping identity (Redclift, 2016). Studies on Lebanese migration, particularly in the Francophone context, have emphasized themes of political exile and transgenerational trauma, but have not sufficiently analysed the diaspora memory and identity in literature (Altwaiji & Alwuraafi, 2021; Hodeib, 2021; Jaoudé & Rugo, 2021; Baghdadadi, 2024). By focusing on the diasporic

memory and identity in *Beyrouth-sur-Seine*, this article contributes to the field by demonstrating how memory operates beyond nostalgia and trauma, serving instead as a dynamic process that enables migrants to negotiate and redefine their identities across cultural and temporal boundaries.

The analysis draws on theories of memory and cultural hybridity. Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory helps to analyse how the memories of Lebanon that the characters have are shaped by their forced dislocation from Lebanon. Hirsch defines postmemory as the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before experiences that they remember only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up (Hirsch, 2008). In *Beyrouth-sur-Seine*, Kaïssar and Hanane's memories of Lebanon are mediated through objects and narratives.

The notion of postmemory serves to discuss the intergenerational transmission of memory within a diasporic framework. Homi K. Bhabha's trope of hybridity also informs discussions of diasporic subjects and their negotiation of multiple cultural identities. Bhabha describes the domain of in-betweenness that diasporic individuals inhabit as a third space within which these individuals are neither entirely aligned with their motherland, nor fully immersed in the new life they lead outside of their place of origin (Bhabha, 1994). This liminal space is concomitantly a space of culture negotiation, in which diasporic individuals recall elements from either culture and recombine them to reincarnate themselves culturally. This article also draws on Alexis Nouss' concepts of non-lieu and exilience to characterise the novel's domestic and emotional space as a space in which the "state" of exile becomes a lived experience rather than an abstract condition. Kaïssar and Hanane embody this hybridity in *Beyrouth-sur-Seine* as they try to negotiate their hybrid identity as both Lebanese exiles and Parisian dwellers.

This article discusses how memory works in *Beyrouth-sur-Seine*, noting that it is not only about mourning what is lost; it is also about constructing what is still possible to live. As

forced displacement reaches historic global levels, it has become both analytically urgent and politically necessary to understand how diasporic subjects reconstruct identity through everyday practices. In exile, memory is a mechanism employed by diasporic subjects to redefine a sense of belonging and express a hybrid self beyond the binary of homeland and host country. This article demonstrates that the tool can be read not as a symptom of loss, but as an aspect of ongoing and active agency.

## Methodology

This study employs textual analysis as its primary method. Textual analysis is concerned with the literary work itself and its formal features. Moreover, it requires close attention to the literary piece while minimising contextual presuppositions (Belsey, 2013). As this method concerns how meaning is produced in texts and cultural artefacts, cultural criticism and scholarship are especially suited to it. Even as it engages in close reading of the text, it attends both to how the text works and to the conditioning (historical, cultural, psychological, and so forth) of that work.

The main object of the study is *Beyrouth-sur-Seine* (2022) by Sabyl Ghoussoub. The novel was chosen for its exploration of themes of exile, intergenerational memory, and belonging of the Lebanese diaspora. To supplement the analysis, secondary literature on Lebanese migration, post-war identity-making, and Francophone diaspora literature is brought in.

Memory studies from Marianne Hirsch and Sune Haugbolle serve as the general theoretical framework for the study. Researchers in this field argue that both individual and collective memories are contended, partial, and contentious (Haugbolle, 2011; Hirsch, 2008). Traumatic experiences play an important role in linking our present subjectivities to our pasts. Not only do they reactivate wounds that weren't always healing, but they also enable reinterpretation and recovery. The same

issues occur in diasporic literature, which often maps the experiences of dislocation as well as the cultural negotiation of space and time (Chen, 2021).

The research takes a qualitative approach in the framework of textual analysis. Qualitative research focuses on investigating and interpreting the meanings that individuals or groups give to social or human phenomena (Creswell, 2014). The analysis began with various readings of the novel, after which important passages and formulations were noted regarding the object of study. The material was then organised into themes and sub-themes. The data analyses were conducted in two stages, namely: (1) data reduction, which involves selecting relevant pieces of text and classifying them into categories; and (2) verification, which entailed that the findings were checked against the theories discussed above.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Kaïssar and Hanane: Diasporic Identities Inside the 'Lebanese Bubble'

The Lebanese diaspora in Paris, like any other diaspora group, can be defined as a community of dispersed individuals who feel alienated and a sense of loss. As many are forced from their homes because of conflict and war, the refugee experience is often defined by the unease between wanting to cling to the past, the culture, and adapting to the new host land (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020; Primecz, 2023; Hammoud, 2024). This tension is particularly evident in *Beyrouth-sur-Seine*. Through Ghoussoub's writing we can see how memory and cultural practice act as vehicles of identity reconstruction in the context of exile.

An individual whose identity is firmly entrenched in a set of intellectual and political commitments, Kaïssar's early life in Lebanon reveals someone "closely linked to literature and the arts" (Ghoussoub, 2022, p. 22). From a young age, Kaïssar finds refuge from the strictures of his Maronite education in literature and art. When denied piano lessons

as a boy, he turns to writing instead, such that by the time he turns twenty, he is already recognised in his milieu as a talented screenwriter and director. As well as constituting an integral part of his identity, this artistic grounding provides an important survival strategy on which he is able to draw after his arrival in Paris in 1975. Enrolled in a doctoral program in theatre and Arabic at the Sorbonne, Kaïssar sets about continuing his work as an intellectual committed to the preservation of Lebanese cultural heritage. The life he carves out for himself in Paris is far from sedentary. Alongside his university studies, Kaïssar works, among other posts, as a cultural journalist for Arab media outlets and the director of the *Centre de recherches et d'études arabes* (CREA) at the Université Saint-Joseph in Beirut, in addition to a host of other teaching and translation positions

Engaging in Parisian cultural life, Kaïssar also solidified his identity negotiations in the diaspora. He deeply invests himself in the intellectual and artistic life of the city, "seeing theatre performances on a regular basis, allowing Ionesco's *La Leçon* to inform his philosophical ethos" (Ghoussoub, 2022, p. 49). Therefore, the economic precariousness of his life in Paris is marked by compromise. This is visible in his work as translator and interpreter for high-profile clients like Yves Saint Laurent, but also his refusal to take on 'lucrative' translation work in Syria, despite his hatred of the Assad regime. This shows a willingness to compromise in order for his family to survive

His refusal to stop insulting God and the three monotheistic religions in his Sorbonne lectures ultimately leads to his dismissal. This illustrates his unwillingness to compromise his intellectual convictions, even at the cost of economic precarity, as the following quote demonstrates:

*Depuis que mon père était professeur à la Sorbonne, la direction recevait diverses plaintes d'élèves et de parents d'élèves. Un cours sur deux, il insultait Dieu et les trois religions monothéistes. Le responsable du département le suppliait d'arrêter, de garder ses insultes pour les discussions au café ou ses articles, mais dans l'enceinte de*

*son université, ce n'était pas possible.* (Ghoussoub, 2022, p. 53)

Since my father was a professor at the Sorbonne, the administration received various complaints from students and their parents. In every other class, he insulted God and the three monotheistic religions. The head of the department begged him to stop, suggesting he reserve his insults for discussions at the café or his articles, but it wasn't acceptable within the university.

The economic entanglements as described above are symptomatic of many diaspora communities, wherein access to career is dictated politically and culturally (Prinz & Siegel, 2019; Gevorkyan, 2021). Furthermore, his dismissal demonstrates how fragile economic precarity is within the diaspora, since jobs are often reliant on the ability to negotiate cultural and religious tensions (Carment & Calleja, 2018).

In contrast to Kaïssar's intellectual identity, Hanane had a strong identity rooted in emotional and family ties to Lebanon. Her experience as a refugee is characterised by her longing for the life she has left, and the family that she was forced to leave. Used to the privileges of her childhood in Lebanon, such as her father owning one of the first cars in Lebanon, she finds the Paris metro illegible and impossible to use, confused both by its layout and by the homeless that wanders its platforms, a phenomenon she has never seen in Lebanon, as seen in the following quote:

*Au Liban, elle ne se déplaçait qu'en voiture. Son père lui laissait la sienne. Il était l'un des premiers au Liban à en avoir acheté une. Sa plaque d'immatriculation était là pour le certifier : le nombre 3101 était inscrit dessus (...) À Paris, ma mère découvrait l'existence des clochards. Au Liban, elle n'en avait jamais vu.* (Ghoussoub, 2022, p. 41)

In Lebanon, she only travelled by car. Her father lent her his. He was one of the first in Lebanon to buy one, and his licence plate confirmed it: the number 3101 was displayed on it. (...) In Paris, my mother

discovered the existence of homeless people. In Lebanon, she had never seen any.

This cultural dissidence within the diasporic community demonstrates the significant changes the diaspora is forced to accommodate as they balance a spectrum of past lives with the realities of the present (Corbett et al., 2021). Furthermore, in conjunction with both of the above examples, her reflection on the profound changes to Lebanon serves to highlight her alienation and longing for a homeland that, as she describes it, is no longer there.

Hanane's resilience is especially evident in her professional life which is full of opportunities and challenges: thus, through her work at the Iraqi Cultural Center in Paris she is constantly navigating political and cultural tensions. The traumatic experience of being caught in a hostage situation at the Iraqi Embassy in 1978 demonstrates the vulnerability of her position as a member of diaspora when she expresses her "wish to die in Lebanon not in France; and had to deal with her own yearning for home" (Ghoussoub, 2022, p. 111). In this incident, both the vulnerability of her position as a Lebanese woman in a foreign city, as well as the ways in which global political conflicts shape the lives of diaspora communities, become apparent (Toivanen & Baser, 2020; Féron & Voytiv, 2021).

The diaspora identities and experiences of Kaïssar and Hanane are also accompanied by their difficulties as immigrants in the charged climate of French race relations. Their struggles are emblematic of the tension between assimilation into French society and retaining one's cultural heritage, as well as the emotional and practical challenges of creating a life in a foreign landscape (Boccagni & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2023; Ullah, 2025). First, Hanane's struggle with the Parisian metro as a seedy, unendurable space contrasts with her memory of the natural beauty of Lebanon. She expresses here the alienation of being caught between a place that she "considers home and a real life that both does not conform to her romanticized ideal and is harsh and

unforgiving at the same time" (Ghoussoub, 2022, p. 42).

Kaïssar, on the other hand, represents a more complex juxtaposition of identity and belonging. His slightly ungrammatical French is littered with Lebanese expressions, such as when he conjugates his verbs in the infinitive form in one place or uses Arabic words in an otherwise French sentence in another, showing that he has brings over linguistic idiosyncrasies from Lebanon as a resistance to full assimilation. Their first few years in Paris as a couple were full of struggle and alienation. Their first apartment in a predominately Chinese-populated neighborhood is a place of instability in physical space as much as it was a place of metaphorical shifting, evident here:

*ils avaient trouvé un appartement rue de Choisy, « chez les Chinois » comme dit ma mère. Les valises à peine déposées dans leur nouveau chez-eux, le mur de l'appartement de mes parents a commencé à trembler. Des coups assourdissants ont retenti, une femme s'est mise à hurler : « Rentrez chez vous ! » Ma mère, effrayée, était en pleurs. [...] Blottie contre les épaules de mon père, ma mère marmonnait « Baddi mama w baba », Je veux ma mère et mon père. Elle a haussé le ton (Ghoussoub, 2022, p. 31)*

they found a flat on Rue de Choisy, "with the Chinese," as my mother put it. Barely after setting their suitcases down in their new home, the walls of my parents' flat began to tremble. Deafening banging erupted, and a woman started screaming, "Go back home!" My mother, frightened, was in tears. [...] Huddled against my father's shoulders, my mother muttered, "Baddi mama w baba"—I want my mother and father. Her voice grew louder.

The excerpt clearly describes the suffering and isolation often experienced by immigrants. The loud and disturbing knocking on the wall, accompanied by the neighbor's aggressive command, reflects the xenophobia faced by many immigrants (Kanayo et al., 2019; Berdiyev & Can, 2022; Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2022). Hanane's immediate reaction reveals the emotional vulnerability and

insecurity that can arise when one is considered an unwanted stranger in a foreign land. Her whispered longing for her parents illustrates the painful alienation and homesickness that often accompany the experience of migration (Bascuñan-Wiley, 2021; Rosner et al., 2022).

Yet, despite these challenges, the choice that Kaïssar and Hanane make in pursuit of French citizenship shows the position they take as immigrants on practical terms of survival in a foreign land: Hanane, although she wishes to be considered French on paper, refuses to become French in spirit, evidential of their tenacity as immigrants to retain their national identities. There is some humor behind the decision to become French citizens. It is not so much an acceptance of the identity of Frenchness that Hanane or Kaïssar seek, but a guarantee of things that they enjoyed, such as their subscription at the library, and one which would protect them from the bureaucratic hassle of having to go through the process of renewing their abilities to habituate in France, after they already arrived and established themselves in the country. Hanane's anecdote about the systematic difficulties she and other immigrants faced, and the very real possibility of explosive violence that she feared, highlights how she was in constant fear of such incidents and her disengagement with the system. Kaïssar's sarcastic response to a journalist's question about how he feels, how he feels as a French citizen, that he might only ever feel at home if he were ever in the Père-Lachaise cemetery, sums up his deep scepticism of the assimilation process and his estrangement from it.

## 2. The Re-Creation of the Lost Homeland

While Kaïssar and Hanane's identities represent constructions of the self based on individual experience and point of view, their formation as a couple offers an alternative to the understanding of diaspora identity. For identity is negotiated between two parties in their everyday relationship, as well as individually (Pindi, 2018; Bhandari, 2020; Yampolsky et al., 2021).

In their compact Parisian apartment, the couple have constructed a Lebanese bubble, a

distinctive space that has served the double purpose of sheltering and nurturing memory. Here, they have sustained the language, the tastes, the customs, the ways of feeling that remind them both of their country of origin. This was more than space; it was also a cultural and emotional space, a space that allowed them to maintain a connection to their home country, even as they lived in France. Such a space can be understood as a third space in the sense described by Homi K. Bhabha, who describes it as an in-between zone, a location in which migrants negotiate their identity by hybridising aspects of the culture of origin with that of the host society (Bhabha, 1994).

The physical space of the apartment provided an important element of what can be called the Lebanese bubble. Ghousoub gives a description of the family's modest dwelling of three rooms in the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris, which Hanane, who held a certain distaste for typically French proper – and particularly suburban – manners, lovingly referred to as *la cage aux oiseaux*, the birdcage, because of the formation of rooms, all small and interconnected:

*Ma mère l'appelle « la cage aux oiseaux » tellement les pièces sont petites et imbriquées les unes dans les autres. Des deux côtés se trouvent deux balcons étroits sur lesquels mes parents ont recréé le jardin de leurs villages respectifs au Liban. On y trouve des citronniers, des oliviers, des mandari-niers, des tomates cerises, des concombres, de la menthe et tout ça dans un espace très restreint. (Ghousoub, 2022, p. 16)*

My mother calls it “the birdcage” because the rooms are so small and interconnected. On either side, there are two narrow balconies where my parents have recreated the gardens from their respective villages in Lebanon. There are lemon trees, olive trees, mandarin trees, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, mint, all crammed into a very limited space.

Although far from their home country, Lebanese narratives were rekindled from mere bits and pieces of mundane details. The cramped balcony was turned into a modest

garden: lemon and olive trees, along with an array of other plants, grow from pots. In and with them, they are reminded of their home village in Lebanon. Their small garden is not merely a pleasant eye catcher, rather, it is another possibility for the diaspora to rewrite the homeland and its history (Hanazaki et al., 2023; Hayuningsih, 2023). In that sense, this situation can also be understood as a concrete experience of *non-lieu*. The *non-lieu* becomes home to a space where the past and the present coalesce. It is born through a negotiation of a space that is itself the product of an existential given experienced by the migrant or the refugee (Nouss, 2015).

The Lebanese bubble is increasingly sustained through everyday cultural practices, notably through food and cooking. She sticks to the same old recipes she has always known, with the same flavours she remembers from her childhood. It was her frustration with what she sees as poor Lebanese cookbooks in Paris that prompted her to put together her own: an urge to correct, to preserve, and to share what she considered to be authentic flavours. Recording these recipes assures her that the Lebanon she considers "authentic" will endure.

The red notebook, bringing together recipes from her mother, grandmother and friends, becomes a very personal link to the past, not a book like any other, but the "archive of memories she took with her into exile" (Ghoussoub, 2022, p. 103). These recipes were never written down in the first place. They were spoken, demonstrated, and passed down across generations of women before Hanane commits them to the page. To record and preserve these recipes is to preserve orality (Havard, 2019; Nyah et al., 2026). In the kitchen, Hanane ensures that her family and her children can always taste Lebanon, despite their distance from home. Onions, garlic and olive oil are important markers: their smell and taste bring back memories of Lebanon. Cooking and food are also a major element of social cohesion in the diaspora (Lefort, 2022).

It is no coincidence that Hanane punctuates her meals with parties. For the occasion, cousins, friends, and other Lebanese

exiles gather. At the dinner table, collective memories are renewed and cultural affirmations are made:

*Je ne sais pas comment je faisais Sabyl, me dit ma mère, je travaillais toute la journée et chaque soir j'organisais un festin. Il y avait toujours des cousins et des cousines ou des amis du Liban de passage à Paris. [...] Comment pouvait-on manger ce plat ? Je mettais des cailles, des pigeons, des perdreaux, du poireau, de la carotte, des oignons, beaucoup d'huile et bien évidemment, de la friké. Je passais des heures à chercher dans Paris les bonnes épices, les bons ingrédients. À l'époque, ce n'était pas aussi facile de trouver des épiceries orientales, méditerranéennes, libanaises presque à chaque coin de rue. [...] Le sumac, j'en prenais un kilo dans un sac plastique pour tenir une année entière. (Ghoussoub, 2022, pp. 109–110)*

"I don't know how I did it, Sabyl," my mother said to me. "I worked all day and every night I made a banquet. There were always passing cousins or friends from Lebanon stopping off in Paris. [...] How did we eat that dish? I needed quails, pigeons, partridges, leeks, carrots, onions, a good quantity of oil and, of course, *friké*. I spent hours searching through Paris for the right spices and ingredients. At the time there wasn't an Oriental, Mediterranean or Lebanese grocer on practically every corner just like that. [...] *Sumac*, I used to bring in in a great big one-kilogram plastic bag, to last the whole year."

In the citation above, she even goes so far as to procure ingredients hard to find in Paris, like *mloukhiyyeh* leaves and *sumac*. It denotes just how important the authenticity of flavour is to her. In the context of the diaspora, food is often a way to resist the erosion of culture and assimilation in foreign lands (Parveen, 2016; Suri, 2025). Cooking and eating together also offers sense of continuity and stability for the family (Berrebbah, 2020; Das, 2021; Strand, 2022; Carrigan et al., 2023; Chattopadhyay & Sinha, 2024; Mazzonetto et al., 2025; Müller et al., 2026).

Her ritual of cooking on Sundays with her cousin Nawal is a strong example. She cooks for everybody, even those who can not come. On the face of it, there is little complexity within this particular ritual, but therein lies the beauty of it, food becomes a locus of love and connection. These small rituals “replace the large gatherings and family meetings which become something of a distant memory, conditioned upon the bases of distance and ruptured relation” (Ghoussoub, 2022, p. 264). The kitchen is the third space where Lebanese tradition remains and is practised. Food is really the bedrock of this family’s assertion of cultural identity, in exile.

From an emotional and symbolic perspective, the Lebanese bubble is no less significant. It is clear that Hanane is emotionally attached to her homeland. The literal examples of this might be found in small details: Hanane’s choice of cell phone ringtone, Fairouz’s song, *Bhebbak ya Lebnan*, (“I Love You, Lebanon”) which becomes a symbol of the homesickness that she carries with herself in the new city.

The same feeling of nostalgia is echoed in the name of the family WhatsApp group, Liban (“Lebanon”). By using this group, Hanane keeps in touch with the members of the extended family who live in different countries. It is a virtual third space where they keep each other close despite the distance. In terms of visual dimension, Kaïssar’s relation to his hometown is represented, too. In the living room, there is a “huge blue painting on the wall which depicts the streets where Kaïssar spends his childhood in a Lebanese village” (Ghoussoub, 2022, p. 103). The painting is more than just decoration. It transforms the Paris apartment into a space of memories in which the past overlaps with the present.

Besides all of this, the Lebanese bubble is a form of resistance to assimilating into the new place. On several occasions, Hanane feels herself disturbed when she encounters the French take on Lebanese foodways. She even feels frustrated when foods such as *halloumi* and *hummus* become “trendy but often devoid of the context that originally gave them a meaning” (Ghoussoub, 2022, p. 109). From Hanane’s point of view, this is not merely a

question of taste but one of authenticity and meaning. Likewise, there is a similar attitude in Kaïssar’s case. He deliberately chooses to keep his distance from the people who make derogatory remarks about Lebanon

These attitudes may be trivial on the surface, but at their deeper core, such tensions are important. Within them lies an assertion of cultural diginality in a new context (Saw, 2018). Nevertheless, the Lebanese bubble is not entirely stable. There is tension within it. On the one side, it provides a sense of continuity. On the other side, it reminds at every moment that Lebanon can no longer be fully reconstituted in an identical fashion in Paris. The small but charged details in the novel such as Hanane’s Fairouz ringtone, the family WhatsApp group named ‘Liban’, Hanane standing dwarfed before the Eiffel Tower register the same unresolved pull between the Lebanon that is carried and the Paris that must be inhabited. These are not incidental details but the very texture of diasporic life, the material and affective residue of a homeland that can be evoked but never fully recovered. Through those moments, the fragility of the bubble is laid bare. It gives protection, but at the same time it reinforces the reality of exile. In this way, Ghoussoub manages to portray diaspora identity construction as that which is never complete. It is born out of the tension between the will to hold onto the world left behind, and the necessity to exist in the present

## Conclusion

*Beyrouth-sur-Seine* exposes how those who have been forced to leave war-torn countries try to rebuild not in the abstract but through the small routines and cultural practices that take place in a domestic setting. In Paris, Kaïssar and Hanane build what, in the novel, is described as a Lebanese bubble: a space that is both shelter and assertion. There, they cultivate their language, their taste, their storytelling and habits, faced with the reality of being a migrant. Every day life becomes the medium for cultivating one’s origins. In this sense, their apartments function as a third space – an in-between in which identity is always negotiated. Lebanese heritage and French reality are not statically opposed, but

intersect, sometimes negotiating, sometimes conflicting.

What the novel ultimately shows is that memory in conditions of exile is never simply retrospective. For Kaïssar and Hanane it is the very stuff through which identity is constructed on a daily basis through the recipe in a little red notebook, a garden on a Parisian balcony, a ringtone which carries Lebanon into the French public space. It is not nostalgia as stasis; it is memory as praxis. Hirsch's idea of postmemory offers insight into the workings of intergenerational transmission, but Ghousseb goes further: the production of memory itself is identity-making; belonging is not given but made ceaselessly.

As war, climate crisis, and political instability continue to drive displacement at unprecedented scales, the intimate strategies captured in this novel speak to a condition that is both globally present and urgently contemporary. Future research can usefully extend this framework to other Francophone diaspora literatures, especially those from Sub-Saharan African and Southeast Asian migratory contexts where memory, domesticity and identity reconfiguration await detailed exploration.

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