

ATLANTIS

Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies

37.2 (December 2015): 201-215

ISSN 0210-6124

Linda Grant: An Interview

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Writer and journalist Linda Grant was born in Liverpool in 1951.¹ The child of Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants, grandchild of Holocaust survivors, she belongs to what might be called the third generation of British-Jewish women authors who, like Jenny Diski and Zina Rohan, among others, “took centre stage” in the British literary panorama during the 1990s (Behlau and Reitz 2004, 12).

Linda Grant read English at the University of York, between 1972 and 1975, and continued with MA and postgraduate studies in Canada. She started her career as a journalist when she returned to Britain in 1985 to work for *The Guardian*. In 2012 she gained an honorary doctorate from the University of York and she currently lives in North London. Her first publication was a non-fiction book on feminism entitled *Sexing the Millennium: A Political History of the Sexual Revolution* (1993) which analysed the cultural changes brought about by the sexual revolution of the 1970s. From the origins of sexual freedom to the backlash against feminism experienced in the 1990s, this book can be read as an optimistic claim for the sexual empowerment of women in order to achieve equality and independence.

Her next work was her liminal memoir, *Remind Me Who I Am, Again* (1998), dealing with the loss of memory of her mother and the way that event challenged all the knowledge she had about her Jewish background, making her question the role of memory and the transmission of family memories in the formation of contemporary identities. This is a very intricate task for those Jewish diasporic identities that have traditionally had recourse to literary practices to keep their memories, (hi)stories and traditions alive (Whitehead 2009, 136); an aspect that turns most of her creations into hybrid and liminal works. At this point she started publishing fictional works: *The Cast Iron Shore* (1996), *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2000), *Still Here* (2002), *The Clothes on their Backs* (2008), *We Had It So Good* (2011), and her latest novel *Upstairs at the Party*, published in 2014.

¹ The research carried out for the writing of this interview is part of a project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (MINECO) (code FFI2012-32719). The author is also grateful for the support of the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H05) and for the support of the University of Zaragoza (245216 JIUZ-2014-HUM-O2).

Writing in a direct, straightforward and realist style, her novels address the generational transmission of memory, the role of place in the construction of Jewish female identities, the journey of rebellious female characters in search of personhood away from traditional patriarchal models of womanhood, the complex family tensions observed within Jewish institutions, the subtle and invisible burden of the memory of the Holocaust in subsequent generations of Jewish survivors. She has also written further non-fiction works such as *The People on the Street: A Writer's View of Israel* (2006)—a hybrid work revolving around her visits to Israel, the distant past of her ancestors and the main historical events that have influenced the present situation in Palestine—and *The Thoughtful Dresser* (2009), as well as continuing to collaborate with *The Guardian* on a regular basis.

Proof of her success as a writer is the fact that she has been shortlisted for many literary prizes and has been awarded various honours in the last few years. Her first novel won the David Higham First Novel Award in 1996 and was shortlisted for The Guardian Fiction Prize. Her memoir *Remind Me Who I Am, Again* (1998) obtained the MIND/Allen Lane Book of the Year Award and the Age Concern Book of the Year Award. Her second novel, *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2000) received the Orange Prize for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Jewish Quarterly Prize. Then, *Still Here* (2002) was long listed for the Booker Prize, and *The People on the Street* (2006) received the Lettre Ulysses Prize for Literary Reportage. In 2008, *The Clothes on their Backs* won the South Bank Show Award. As Bryan Cheyette acknowledges in his review of Grant's novels, after having experienced a "meteoric rise" in her career (2002), Linda Grant has published several novels, receiving good critical appraisal; her presence at book festivals and in the media has increased over the last few years; and many of her works have been re-published in different editions. This is the background to this interview, conducted on August 13, 2014 just thirteen days after the release of her latest novel *Upstairs at the Party*, a novel in which Grant draws on her own experience as an undergraduate to unveil how memory works, following specific characters throughout their lives and allowing readers to see how life has changed them. The novel also provides an insight into male and female relations and female friendship and captures a glimpse of what life is and how certain disturbing events can change our lives forever. In this interview Grant describes the nature of her works, talking about the drives that have turned her into a writer and the main ideas and topoi that configure her brilliant literary career, a career in which we can still expect much more success in the future years.

SP: *Would you say that the fact of having been a journalist for a long time has influenced your process as a writer of fiction and vice versa? For instance, I am thinking of your work The People on the Street (2006), which appears as a journalistic reportage on your journeys to Palestine, collecting your thoughts after interviewing different Israeli people while it also contains traits of many other genres such as fictionalised episodes, memoir, political essay, historical discourse, diary, literary criticism. This book in particular made me wonder whether or not you think consciously about the genre that you want to make use of during your process of creation.*

LG: Of course, before becoming a writer I was writing as a news reporter for quite a long time. A lot of what I was doing at that time was inveigling myself into the souls of complete strangers and getting them to tell me their stories, listening to the way they constructed their identities, watching their body language... And I often felt that, when they were telling me a story, I could tell the story better. I think that training was very important to me, and it spills over in the way that I write, because I think my style is quite observational. A friend just told me that I always write with a sense of time and place, and I think that comes from the journalism: a time, a place and people in a situation. I think that is what I got from journalism. In fact, I am not hugely interested in the experimental novel or in genre and form; I am not massively intrigued by the form of the novel but by the protagonists. I am interested in stories, in how people tell stories, and what their stories are.

SP: *Then what do you think about the explosion of (semi)autobiographical genres that has been recently witnessed in the literary arena? For instance, Alison Light has asserted that literary biography has become the most successful popular literary form among the British readership since the 1960s (2004, 751); Roger Luckhurst considers that a “memoir boom” has invaded the literary panorama since the 1990s (2008, 117); and Leigh Gilmore asserts that “memoir has become the genre in the skittish period around the turn of the millennium” (2001, 1, original emphasis). These and many other contemporary critics have pointed out the fact that the critical panorama seems to be more and more interested in a variety of autobiographical genres, what do you think about it?*

LG: Well, the memoir boom really took place in Britain in the late 1990s with Blake Morrison's *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (1993): a book which gave place to many similar pieces of writing. Thus, that was sort of the beginning of the memoir boom, and I do not think it has really abated, we are still writing memoir, as you mentioned. Indeed, I think it is a good aspect of the contemporary literary arena, because it allows people to tell a story without having to novelise it. Sometimes, telling a story as it is becomes the best way of telling it. For me, the creative process is really about the question “can you turn this experience into a story? Is it your story there? Or is it just this happened, this happened, this happened...?” And it is also about the ability to tell a person a story through non-fiction and make it compelling. There is a great hunger for it indeed. When I published my most autobiographical work *Remind Me Who I Am, Again* (1998), some of the most interesting responses to it were people saying that they had liked it because they knew it was a true story, which demonstrated to me that readers wanted it to be true, and somehow they thought it was less true if it was fiction. It could be wrong, but that is what many people thought.

SP: *Well, in fact, when I analysed that work I did not analyse it as a single genre. Although Remind Me Who I Am, Again has been classified as a memoir revolving around your and your sister's dilemmas when your mother was diagnosed with dementia, my main claim is that*

it might be too simplistic to classify it as a traditional memoir. In that work, the disintegration of your mother's memory becomes the leitmotif, creating a hybrid book that could be classifiable in multifarious ways: as a photograph album, an essay on memory, a historical insight into the Jewish migratory movements, a personal diary about your dealing with this illness... And I think that nowadays we can observe this blurring of generic boundaries in many contemporary works, which have come to be classified by critics like Leigh Gilmore as limit-case autobiographies: liminal works that blur the boundaries between "autobiography and fiction, autobiography and history, autobiography and legal testimony, autobiography and psychoanalysis, or autobiography and theory" (2001, 14). These liminal creations are usually the product of the paradoxes emerging out of the tensions produced when the representation of the self and his or her fragmented memories overlap. Do you think your works could be read as examples of these hybrid narratives responding to your need to negotiate your personal and family complex memories?

LG: Yes, but then I had some reviews saying things like "this book does not know what it is supposed to be, is it a diary? A memoir?" And that shows that sometimes readers found it difficult because they need to pin down a form and ascribe a book to a particular genre.

SP: *Yes, of course, there has always existed a kind of need for labels to classify works in one way or another... But, in my view, generic uncertainty is not precisely negative, as it may be seen as a positive evolution of literature. Readers, critics and writers alike can learn a lot about texts currently exploring and experimenting with form in order to achieve the complex struggles that come to the fore when representing the self and memory.*

LG: Yes, of course! In fact, the decision to use photographs in the way that I used them, on the page rather than as a separate document, actually came from W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* (1992), as I wanted to use photographs to describe the actions.

SP: *Oh, yes, that link with Sebald's work is quite remarkable but, thinking about the connections with other writers, it surprised me to some extent to see that Eva Figes and you both wrote a feminist political manifesto at the beginning of your career.*²

LG: Oh, yes! Her book *Patriarchal Attitudes* ([1970] 1986) was really very, very important for the 1970s, and I read it of course.

SP: *Yes, and you also wrote your feminist manifesto at the beginning of your career as a writer with Sexing the Millennium (1993), a book exploring the consequences brought about by the sexual revolution and defending women's empowerment through their sexual liberation. So, if this book was written in the early 1990s, how do you see yourself now as a feminist with the passing of time?*

LG: I think that feminism was absolutely the most important political movement of my life, I mean of my lifetime. It is the one that had the biggest influence on

² Eva Figes was a very prolific British-Jewish writer that belonged to that first generation of Jewish immigrants in Britain escaping the horrors of the Holocaust.

me, more than anything else. I think that feminism, for me, makes reference to those occasions when you react to what is happening in the world, and feminism is my way of engaging with it. For instance, it makes me react to the misogyny of the world we live in, which we don't realise because of the social media's pressure. This is very important to me. In the case of my latest novel *Upstairs at the Party* (2014), it is interesting to me that none of the reviewers has picked up on the topic of feminine friendship and the bonds established between the main character Adele and her female friends during the time of the so-called sexual revolution. It is not only that there is female friendship, but the contrast between the way the generation of Adele's mother understood friendship and the way Adele and her friends created theirs. So, yes, I can say that feminism has been and still is extremely significant for me. When I wrote *Sexing the Millennium*, I did not feel confident enough to write a novel, exactly what my agent suggested, and I can think now that it was a sort of wasted opportunity because I did not bring into the world what I was doing, and I allowed it to fall out of print.

SP: *Yes, it is a pity; readers could have had access to a great display of female characters living their sexuality and freedom in very different and complex ways, as happens to some of these female characters in Upstairs at the Party. And, continuing with feminism, I feel disappointed when I observe the current feminist backlash explored by feminists such as Natasha Walter (2010) and Joan Smith (2013). I see many young women of my generation looking at feminism from a very negative perspective as an extreme, essentialist or radical movement and then, they even reject being called feminists or they do not even see themselves as such. What are your views on this?*

LG: Yes, what these women do not seem to understand is that all the freedoms they now have come from feminism. So I would say to them, "do you want to lose all these rights or do you think they came with oxygen?"

SP: *That is a very good answer actually. Moving on to a different aspect now, we were talking about the act of "pigeon holing" writers, which is widespread in present-day literary criticism, and I wanted to know your view on this, how would you define yourself as a writer? Would you agree with being read as a British-Jewish woman writer, as Beblau and Reitz have done when they refer to you as part of that "third generation" of British-Jewish women writers who are strongly trying to add their voice to British literature and history by "exploring their families' past and their Jewishness" in their works (2004, 12)? Or would you agree with other different labels that may be given to you, such as that of feminist writer?*

LG: Well, all those things are true. I think that what I would say is that I cannot be a British writer because you can only write out of your culture. I think that Britishness is a minor note in my work, and I don't think that the themes of Englishness or Britishness that are, for instance, present in Ian McEwan are very relevant in my work at all. In my case, I have written all of my novels in the first person because I find the first-person voice the most comfortable to write in and I think that, while I enjoy writing in a male voice, the attempt to write in a female voice who does not belong

to the mainstream culture is part of my identity and it is part of what I am trying to achieve. I am trying to achieve female voices who are not one thing or the other, who do not have clear identities. Usually, I write about people leaving home to make a journey or coming home after that journey.

SP: *And what about Jewishness there? It is well-known that Jewishness has been traditionally linked to the idea of exile, and that Jewish identity has been built around the concepts of homelessness and diaspora. In fact, it could be argued that the idea of homeland as closely related to displacement has featured in Jewish identity since the beginning of times (Stein 1984, 7); a feeling famously described by Yerusalmi as “feeling at home within exile itself” (1997, 12) and which has turned the task of defining Jewish identity into a very complex issue. Is this diasporic element an aspect that you have attempted to negotiate through your writing?*

LG: I think that the presence of Jewishness in my work has to do with characters that are faced with conflicts that most people are not faced with. For instance, the character of Sandor in *The Clothes on their Backs* (2008) is very much that kind of character who has to face a variety of moral dilemmas,³ surviving struggles, traumatic experiences and public and moral judgements throughout his life. The thing about all my characters is that they are not completely English, they are always negotiating their identity. In the case of Adele, the main character in *Upstairs at the Party*, I can say she is my most autobiographical character. However, many readers then ask me if my father committed suicide, as happens in the novel, and I have to say “no, my father did not commit suicide,” or they ask me about other autobiographical events that appear in the book. I did not do all these things, of course. It is not about the furniture of your life, but it is about the essence. The heart of this novel is about the feelings that I had when I went to university, into this very middle-class environment, feeling an outsider, feeling that I did not fit in. That is where it is autobiographical, having sections of me, of other people’s perceptions of me. So I am trying to add that to some of my characters, like Adele; that is where the sense of autobiography is: the I that is in Adele is not the I that is in any of those other characters in this work. I was not like any of those other characters, I did not have the vulnerability of Evie and I did not have the dogmatism of the other three women depicted in the narrative.

SP: *I also see as a recurrent topic of your writings the motif of a woman moving away, travelling to discover her true self, her identity—Sybil in The Cast Iron Shore (1996), Evelyn in When I Lived in Modern Times (2000), Alix in Still Here (2002)—I wonder whether, for you, this is representative of a kind of universal post-war human condition that needs to find alternative models to interpret the traumatic world left behind by the horrors, wars and conflicts witnessed during the twentieth century, a universal woman escaping from the patriarchal stereotypes that have been imposed on her throughout history, or a way of*

³ This novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008.

*representing the specific Jewish woman identity caught in the dialectical struggle between belonging to a given community and fighting against the Jewish strict traditional models of family and womanhood.*⁴

LG: That is a very good question. These dilemmas were going on in the modern novel for quite a long time, a very good representative was the American-born Canadian writer Carol Shields who depicted women who were held within the institutions of marriage and womanhood and in the end they needed to break away, so the ending of that fiction was the breaking away. However, I wanted to write stories that start with the beginning of the journey or the return after that journey. There is a critic called Vladimir Propp who talked about the morphology of the fairy tale ([1928] 1968), and he characterises the fairy tale as a young man leaving home to make a journey, so what I think is that it is always *men* that leave the home to make the journey and not *women*, women are static. So when I wrote *The Cast Iron Shore* (1996) it was not so much about a clear Jewish perspective, but absolutely about a female one, creating a character wanting to discover the world and leaving home. Autobiographically, it originates in the time when I graduated from university in 1975, and then I went to America and spent six months hitchhiking from place to place. That was a very defining period of my life because it was formless, I did hitchhiking, I had no grudge, and it was the same sort of impressions made of the huge, the vastness of the road... And I have tried to depict that in Sybil's journey across America. And this also appears when Adele talks at some moment about America in *Upstairs at the Party*, there again you have some of the feelings and experiences that I obtained during my youth. In this case, the experience of getting to America in 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War had a big impact on me. And then I lived in Canada for a time too. So I had this experience of making these fast moves, making these great journeys and feeling changed afterwards. But I did not feel particularly suited at that exact time to write anything that was situated in a particular place. Then, when some years went by and I wrote *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2000), I remember feeling that the challenge was not to write about the journey itself but about the particular city (Tel Aviv), and my publisher encouraged me to do so, and it was only after the event that I realised that it was something I could do. And also, *Upstairs at the Party* (2014) is absolutely about place, a very imposed place.

SP: *In keeping with your depiction of place, it may be said that an essential element in your fiction is the relationship between the characters and place, as you mention. The characters' identities emerge out of exchange and relationality, and I should say that, in this sense, I mainly like the characters of Sybil and Evelyn; particularly, I find that Sybil in The Cast Iron Shore (1996) is a very interesting character, as she wants to run away from patriarchal and family institutions, but then she has very ambivalent relationships with men and depends on them to a great extent.*

⁴ For more information on contemporary Jewish feminist theories, see Baker (1993) and Silberstein and Wolfe (1998).

Yet, she ends up alone eventually and rejects traditional institutions. I read that book as a great contribution to urge contemporary Jewish women to continue looking for their place in the modern world, as is demonstrated by the fact that Sybil travels in order to gain a multidirectional political consciousness as well as her longed-for freedom although, during that journey, she has to lose some things, such as the possibility of forming a family, the capacity to embrace Jewish tradition or the desire to feel she belongs somewhere. Would you agree with that reading of Sybil's quest?

LG: You know the main thing with Sybil, one with which I had to be really careful, was the challenge of writing about someone who was uneducated, and at that stage I was still writing in a kind of amateur way, as it was my first novel. I wanted to depict somebody who was not educated, but who was not part of institutional marriage either. I then realised I wanted to write about those women who had made the tea for the revolution. Therefore, the character of Sybil does not have any sense of purpose, she is acted on by other people, she becomes tougher as she gets older, but there is something lost about her, there is a sort of ruthlessness in her too. But, writing about women who have no education, one of the things about it is that you cannot make any assumptions about what they know. In the particular case of *The Cast Iron Shore*, I can say my main aim was to portray the female condition in general. You know, there is sometimes a trend in the rewriting of history from a female perspective where women are depicted as this terrible word in English *feisty* says, it does not describe men, it only describes women playing much stronger roles. I think this trend is a bit overdone as, in reality, women did not play those roles in real history. So what I wanted to depict was a kind of universal female condition that was as close as possible to the real lives of women.

SP: *Going back to the issue of memory, a key topic that I have analysed in your writings is that of the way in which memory is constructed textually throughout the narrative (Pellicer-Ortín, forthcoming), as happens in Remind Me Who I Am, Again (1998). As we have been talking about previously, memory has become a central concept within research in the humanities and it has been used by scholars as a way to "critique the totalizing mode of conventional historical discourse" (Douglass and Vogler 2003, 6). In fact, it has been observed that those minority groups that had been excluded from hegemonic historical discourses on the grounds of class, gender, race, religion, etc. have attempted to re-construct their fragmented memories through many different cultural and literary practices. In keeping with this, in the Research Group I belong to we really defend the idea that literature plays an important role in constructing and deconstructing memories.⁵ So would you say that writing has been essential for the negotiation of your own individual, family, and collective memories?*

LG: Yes, completely. I think that memory is absolutely, totally essential to everything that I write. If you read *Remind Me Who I Am, Again*, it becomes clear

⁵ For more information on the research group "Contemporary Narratives in English" visit the project's website: <http://cne.literatureresearch.net/>.

why that is the case because, as there is so little written documentation about my family's past and the past of other migrant Jewish families, everything is based on memory, and even on the failure of memory and the value of memory. All memories are unreliable. I mean, memory is not a videotape, it is not a record, memory is interpretation. I have always been fascinated by the way some people remember things about which others have no recollections at all. Clearly, memory is contested, is handed down in families as part of the family inheritance, it is not truthful. When I was writing *Upstairs at the Party*, I was thinking about a girl who died when I was at university, and I was not there, I was not present, I had already left the party when this girl took an overdose, I did not know her very well in fact. Somebody who was there said the last person who saw her alive was this one, and he would know her last words. One day, some years ago, I got an email out of the blue from this man, and I asked him if he had really been the last person to see her alive, and he told me, "no, I wasn't, it could not be me because I wasn't there, I wasn't at that party." I don't know why I had been thinking that, I do not know whether my memory was wrong, so I had been thinking something for around forty years that was wrong, and I misremembered it. We all constantly go through things like that, and in fact, many writers say that the novel is all about memory.

SP: *Yes, and this could support our previous comments on the increasing importance of the field of Memory Studies. It seems that memory has turned into the most widespread source of knowledge in opposition to the prior historiographic claims to universality and objectivity fostered by hegemonic master narratives. The New Historicist claims for the local, the subjective, the individual, those small narratives or petit (hi)stoires seem to have reached their final stage with the defence of memory as the major source of reliability in the current social and literary panorama. I think many of your works could also be read as exemplary of these small and local narratives.*

LG: Yes, and in my particular case, talking about the autobiographical aspect, I can say there are fragments of memory in all my novels, they are full of memory. We try the hardest to connect with the past. Returning to *Upstairs at the Party* (2014) and the personal anecdote that inspired it, I think the most baffling and worrying aspect was going back to your university and saying to the librarian, "where has the café gone?" And she says to you, "there was never a café." And then I say, "yes, there was." And she says, "well, I've been here for the last 25 years." And I say, "yes, but there was before!" That was a moment of sudden realisation that there are so many things that only reside in your memory and in nobody else's. You return to places where you have been and they have all gone into the future without you, they are frozen in your memory due to the internalisation of your own experience. This is a mystery to me! It is completely mysterious, you may have been there at the same time and we will have different memories. We are all constantly trying to reconstruct even the past of seconds ago, when we say, "what have I just said? What did I do this morning?"

So when your memory goes, just as my mother's memory went, all that means to be human seems to go down with it. For me, when I think about myself when I was twenty-two years old, obviously, I was the same person, but if I met myself at twenty-two I just do not know what we would say to each other, and I do not understand how that person became this person. That is why a lot of my novels follow people through a whole-life span, and Sybil in *The Cast Iron Shore* (1996) is the biggest example of that, and to some extent *Upstairs at the Party* [depicting the passage through life of Adele and her circle of university friends] as well, and certainly *We Had It So Good* (2011) [which revolves around the lives of Stephen and Andrea from the moment they meet at university to the final days of their lives] too. These novels answer this question of how this person became that person. And I think the answer has to be found in the accumulation of life events, not only the moments of big decisions, things which just happen and construct your life.

SP: *Yes, in that respect, I was fascinated by your novel Still Here (2002) too, because you can see how both characters, Alix and Joseph, negotiate their memories. In a way Alix has to go back to the Jewish family roots that she had neglected throughout most of her life because of her feminist and liberal ideals, and Joseph also has to face the repressed memories of war and trauma as he suffers from PTSD after having taken part as a soldier in the Yom Kippur War. In this novel, one can see that the characters are struggling to connect and assimilate their disturbing and fragmented memories. I think this is something inherent to the human subject, but nowadays this is more common for those communities that have had to create new identities in new lands or that have gone through traumatic individual and collective episodes which are very difficult to be assimilated and integrated in rational terms, as has happened to the Jewish and other immigrant communities across the world. What do you think? Is this aspect also present in your works in a conscious manner?*

LG: Any community that has migrated really has to be dependent on memory and create a mythology around memory, because if your family has migrated you have to mythologise very well, that is extremely important. If you suppress this, the memories will not reach the next generation, consequently, it has an enormous importance. In fact, this week I re-watched *The Godfather* films and they are great works about memory and the transmission of memory from one generation to the next. This is constantly happening in our present-day culture, not only in literary practices, where there are so many immigrant communities everywhere.

SP: *I also wanted to ask you about the role of politics in your writings. And I am mainly thinking of The People on the Street (2006), a work in which you state your main goal of describing what a Jew is, both for personal reasons—"I suppose I was trying to work out something about Jews, because if I could get that figured out, I might understand something about myself" (5)—and in order to counteract the means by which Western societies have usually looked down on Jewishness—as in your claim that "Jews drive other people mad because they can't work*

out who or what we are" (5). And you do all this while trying to offer an insight into the conflict in Palestine from the inside, a very complicated issue indeed. To what extent do your writings have a political intention?

LG: Well, I think I am not very much interested in politics in my novels. Politics is not an issue in my works. They are more about particular characters, particular states of mind. For instance, in *The Cast Iron Shore* (1996) politics is there but not in that way. For that novel, I had been struck by a book I had read about interviews with members of the American Communist Party,⁶ there were several interviews and one of them was with a woman that was a very sophisticated, a well-dressed lawyer who said: "I was a member of the Communist Party and that made me better than I was so it couldn't be so much worse," and that remark completely fascinated me. These identity contradictions really inspired me for that novel, but it was not the politics itself. And, regarding your comment on *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2000), it originated with me going as a journalist to Tel Aviv, seeing its architecture, and thinking who the first people that had lived there were... All this, thinking about the origins and roots of the city, was what inspired me to write about that. In brief, as for politics, let's say, I have never been like Doris Lessing with a clear political stance.

SP: *Then, if one observes the chronological evolution in the topics and historical contexts depicted in your novels, one realises that your latest novels depict the 1970s, the time of sexual liberation, characters that mature from that time to the present and look back with a certain nostalgia, why is that?*

LG: Yes, well, I hate the word nostalgia, it is not nostalgia. I am trying to go back to a period that was defining in my own life. I mean, one has a relationship with the past and the times one lives, so I suppose there is an element of that. In fact, I do not see myself writing about something that is happening at the present, I do not see a present topic that urges me to write about it right now.

SP: *Well, and what about the role of literature in contemporary society according to your own perspective as a creative writer? I really like the definition you give of literature in The People on the Street (2006) as something that moves you inside, and makes you react and develop empathy for some realities that people could not have access to in any other possible way: "literature . . . should create ambiguity, doubt, discomfort, confusion. At the end of reading a novel or a poem, you should feel that your mind is chaos" (191). Personally, these ideals are those that I try to defend with my own research by launching the belief in the idea that literature has that power to recreate memory, identity, even to heal broken identities or traumas.⁷ Do you also think that writing and art have that power for society in general and for individuals in*

⁶ See Vivian Gornick's book *The Romance of American Communism* (1979). The interview Grant mentions here is that with "Diana Michaels," the initial inspiration for the character of Sybil.

⁷ See Laub and Podell (1995), Henke (1998), Cyrulnik ([2005] 2007), Almog (2007), Bloom (2010) on this.

particular? Would you say that writing is a powerful way of working through migration, suffering, even trauma, or to understand one's identity and assume one's position in society?

LG: Yes, I completely agree with that definition of literature. I think that literature has an absolutely transforming power. Recently, it has happened to me to read books and be shocked afterwards because I discover a thought that I assumed to be my own belonging to another person, and this is because I read that when I was twenty years old. I think that when you reach my age you realise that you are more passionate in your reading when you are fifteen or twenty, what you are reading at that stage will have an enormous impact on your future personality; there is no question of that. Someone told me this morning about this quotation by George Martin, the *Game of Thrones* writer, "if you read literature you inhabit thousands of lives, if you don't read literature you only inhabit your own." And this is the power of literature: it puts you in the head of people that you would never meet in another way. I sometimes get letters, emails from people telling me that what I have written is connected with them in some way, it has touched them, and this happens because novels vibrate and some connections are made across people. You do not do it consciously, but when you do it you may see your job has been done. Writers of literature have the power to speak across centuries to a total stranger, and that is what I think Virginia Woolf did for instance...

SP: *Of course, she is my favourite writer...*

LG: Yes, I feel that I may be Virginia Woolf in that respect. There is a moment in the film *The Hours* (2002) when she is thinking about the character of Mrs. Dalloway and, although I am not a big fan of Nicole Kidman at all, she is amazing in that role because she has that writer's look of looking inward. The writer has the power to look inward and then connect to a stranger afterwards, and you do not know who that stranger is. When I receive these letters or emails, it is difficult for me to reply because I do not know what to say. I mean, I want to say something original because I really appreciate the readers telling me, but I do not know exactly how to reply to that.

SP: *Yes, that is so true. What may be a bit sad is that in the world of current scientific research it seems that all the importance is given to the hard sciences, we have to defend what we do so much, but I really believe that art and literature can give voice to many people and minorities that do not have a voice, give expression to memories and conflicts that could not be verbalised in any other possible way.*

LG: Yes, the results of the defining changing and challenging effects of literature in society have been there all time, they have always existed. People have always been changed by every kind of art, by literature, and by music, music in particular, as it is funny that so many people do not see music as art.

SP: *So we agree of course. And my final question then would be whether, although you have just mentioned that you do not see yourself as part of a specific generation of British-Jewish writers,*

you feel that you are somehow connected to this group of Jewish writers (Elaine Feinstein, Clive Sinclair, Dan Jacobson, Gabriel Josipovici, Anita Brookner...) who have recently started to negotiate their diasporic identities by tracing the past of their ancestors in their creations as subsequent generations of Jewish immigrants and Holocaust survivors (Cheyette 2004, 713), as you do in works like Remind Me Who I Am, Again (1996) or The People on the Street (2006)? Or even, being more specific, do you find aspects in common with other Jewish female writers like Eva Figes, Anita Brookner, Anne Karpf, Jenny Diski, Bernice Rubens... who are said to have been trying to add the Jewish female viewpoint to the current British culture in the last few decades?

LG: Well, I do not think so [laughs]. I think that generally we work in quite different ways. One of the greatest secrets of writers is that we use Facebook, for instance, to create private literary salons because of the social isolation that writing implies. I have a group of friends there and we communicate through Facebook about different things, but what we do is to share our torments and triumphs, it is a way of talking to other people that are going to understand you in a way that most people don't. But I have to say I do not feel a part of a specific group. Also, what happens is that when we go to literary festivals, as I did in Edinburgh last week, is that you meet other writers, people you had never met, and it is so great to have that sense of support, I think that is the word for it, even though we may not like what the other person writes, there is some sense of solidarity as we have gone through similar experiences.

SP: *Yes, but it is also true that when one approaches your writings and those of other Jewish women writers, like Anne Karpf, Eva Figes, and Anita Brookner, one finds similar topics and connections, the same idea of fragmented memories and identities and the complex construction of Jewish memory, which are recurrent motifs in your works.*

LG: Well, I am sure that is true too, but do you know the novelist Andrea Levy? We were together in a conference at a university some years ago and people there discovered that we are neighbours. They were shocked, and they were asking us if we usually met and one of them said that he would love to see what our conversations were about. I said, "what do you think we like talking about?" And he said, "postmodernisms." And then I answered, "the last conversation was about a new Marks & Spencer opening nearby!" Our conversations are about daily life, contracts, agents, the practicalities of our job but we do not talk about our work. I mean, I am a huge admirer of Anita Brookner, of the massive work of hers. I have never met her. I would like to breathe the same air as her. I think she has a wonderful style and I really admire what she does... but that is different from feeling I may be grouped with her as part of the same group or generation of writers.

SP: *Yes, I see your point. Thank you very much for your time and for this enriching conversation. Thank you very much, Linda.*

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Received 16 November 2014

Revised version accepted 5 April 2015

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