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TRANSGENERATIONAL LOSS AND TRAUMA IN ALYAN'S*SALT HOUSES*: RESHAPING IDENTITYBETWEEN MEMORY AND EXILE

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Abstract

In Salt Houses (2017), the Arab American novelist Hala Alyan sheds light on how transnational identities are burdened by cultural contradictions, negative stereotypes, biases, and discrimination. This research paper demonstrates how the pain of loss and trauma has affected different generations through the intergenerational conflict between the past and the present in Alyan's novel Salt Houses. The experience of loss and displacement in the novel begins with the foundational trauma of the Palestinian Nakba of 1948 and the Naksa of 1967, representing the loss of land and homeland and the resulting forced displacement. This loss is not merely geographical or related to identity; rather, it tears apart the social and psychological fabric of the entire family. Grandmother Salma is the one who carries this pain, as the loss of Jaffa, her original home, appears in her dreams and pessimistic visions that foreshadow the family's disintegration. The symbolism of the title Salt Houses encapsulates a state of fundamental existential vulnerability: just as houses made of salt that melt and disappear with the first drops of water, the homes the family builds in Nablus, Kuwait, Beirut, Boston, Paris, and elsewhere remain temporary, constantly threatened by political, military, and social forces. Continuous forced displacement creates a persistent state of instability that deeply affects psychological and social well-being, making loss and trauma not merely past events but enduring, ever-present threats.

Keywords

Hala Alyan, Pain of Loss, Transnational Trauma, Identity, Stereotypes, etc.

Full Article

The concept of trauma and loss acquires central importance in contemporary literary diaspora studies, particularly in Arab American literature, as it reflects the experiences of migration and cultural and political uprooting among Arab women within transnational contexts. Claire Alexander, Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester specializing in youth identities and South Asian diaspora, observes that the trauma of loss profoundly shapes individual identity, a process that typically unfolds within social and cultural contexts saturated with inequality, where psychological uprooting intertwines with ongoing grief to form emerging identities. Thus, the pain of loss and trauma becomes a complex space within which identity is reformulated under the weight of painful memory, where pain intersects with the possibilities of adaptation, reconstruction, and the production of a new meaning of existence (Alexander, 113).

This broad conceptual framework intersects with the contexts and subjectivities embodied by Arab writers in English living in exile, as they have experienced forced displacement from their homeland, internal fragmentation, political and existential tension, constant border-crossing,

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profound losses, and the traumas of diaspora within the spaces of exile. This experience has driven them to carve out alternative spaces for cultural and social recognition and for establishing a sense of belonging within diaspora communities. In this regard, the works of these writers "shed light on a wide range of cultural and ideological perspectives that keep them suspended between two spaces, two identities, two ideologies, two homelands, and two cultures". Accordingly, these writers' re-question spatial and identity boundaries to create new voices and spaces that mediate between movement and belonging, between "here" and "there," thereby enabling the formation of hybrid and reconciliatory identities.

Their literary discourses also emerge from experiences of alienation and living in the gray zone between inside and outside, as well as from encounters with exclusion and the production of "the Other." They critically engage with dominant cultural, political, and social forces that exercise marginalization and reshape the concept of otherness. Dalal Sarnou points out that Arab writers in English "articulate a double consciousness: that of homeland and diaspora, English and Arabic, past and present" (Sarnou, 210), which grants their writings a complex and tension-charged dimension. Consequently, these works explore the worlds of diasporic spaces and navigate transnational migrant voices, with a particular focus on the construction and reconstruction of diasporic identities. Thus, it becomes essential to examine how individuals negotiate diaspora, confront the conflicts of displacement and resettlement, and resist discrimination, racism, and negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in narrative, media, and cinematic discourses. (Aladylah, 2019)

Every Palestinian carry in his pocket an invisible map of Palestine—a map made of memories passed down from generation to generation, as the greatest act of oral documentation in modern history. Since the Nakba of 1948, the Palestinian people have become a unique case in contemporary history: a nation that carries its homeland in memory while parts of it continue to resist occupation on the ground. Every time the last surviving witness of the Nakba dies, a thousand Palestinian children are born carrying the same story. This is the secret of the Palestinian enigma: a people who refuse to become merely a memory. Despite all attempts at erasure, Palestine demonstrates daily that it is not merely a land, but an idea of resistance that triumphs through memory rather than through weapons. The pressing question remains: How long can the world continue to turn a blind eye to the last apartheid regime of the twenty-first century?

The text's importance in Palestinian refugee literature is heightened by its documentation of the echoes of that refuge in the fourth generation of its descendants—those who were born and raised in Paris and the US, especially those who were educated and integrated into their societies and for whom Arabic is no longer their mother tongue. Refugee literature still suffers from a shortcoming in keeping pace with that generation, grasping its reality and its dilemmas, and expressing them honestly and openly, away from the imposition of a forced sense of belonging upon them. For this reason, *Salt Houses* helps fill part of that gap, particularly since the young author herself belongs to the third generation of refugees living and working in the United States. She is also directly connected to the fourth generation, lives their real—not imagined—reality, and is largely capable of expressing it.

With a graceful style brimming with wit and charm and adorned with exquisite metaphors and a luminous poetic language, Alyan immerses us in a narrative recounted from the intimate, personal perspective of her main characters. *Salt Houses* tells the story of Salma Al-Yafawi, a wealthy woman, and her flight with her husband and children—Widad, Mustafa, and Alia—to Nablus following the Nakba. There, her husband dies, and Salma continues raising her children. Widad later marries and moves to Kuwait, while Alia weds her brother's close friend, Atef, and settles not far from her family home. Mustafa, on the other hand, joins Atef in resistance against the occupier despite his family's warnings. He does so while enjoying a comfortable financial

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position, holding a simple job that spares him economic hardship in the large house his mother leaves him after relocating to Amman.

Mustafa's greatest vulnerability, which he confides to us, is Ayah, a poor girl with whom he forms a secret intimate relationship, concealed from his family. Only his close friend and his sister's husband, Atef, knows of it, yet he does not question Mustafa's reluctance to marry her, attributing it to "his mother's fear of her son marrying a girl from a lower social class, Alia's puzzlement over his choice… and the tongues of his aunts, cousins, and neighbours that would wag about it for years to come" (Alyan, 320).

After Nablus falls to the Israeli army and Mustafa is killed following his arrest with Atef, the author takes us to the Kuwaiti capital, where Alia and Atef move to live after the 1967 war. Atef, the university professor, finds no way to ease the trauma of surviving and losing his closest friend except by writing secret letters to him, as if he were still alive. Meanwhile, Alia suffers from the unbearable heat of a city she was forced to live in. Mustafa's death and Alia's reluctant adaptation to her new life cause a silent rift between Atef and Alia, a "tumour of the unspoken" that grows over the years during which they have three children. As their children—a son and two daughters—grow, we witness the third generation experiencing social, cultural, and religious shifts, all intertwined with the lingering trauma of loss, expulsion, and exile.

When Alia was a young teenager, she defied her mother and older sister by refusing to wear a headscarf, maintaining this choice throughout her life. Yet, when her youngest daughter, Suad, reached adolescence, Alia could not refrain from criticizing her style of dress. Alia had grown up in a time when women wore short skirts, tight blouses, lined their eyes with kohl, adorned their hair with feathers, and applied thick lipstick—fashion she preferred all her life. In contrast, teenage girls of her daughter's era, like Suad, constricted their bodies in overly tight leather jeans. Alia saw neither elegance nor beauty in this, considering it more sexually provocative than delicately feminine. Her eldest daughter, Raham, however, wears the hijab and becomes religiously observant. Yet this transformation does not render Raham idealized or superior, nor does it make her dull or joyless; she remains a human being wrestling with the same inner conflicts of good and evil that all hearts endure.

Suad, the daughter of Alia and Atef, first travels to Paris and then to the United States, where she has a son and a daughter. Ultimately, however, she returns to the Middle East, specifically to Beirut, with her two children. Her only brother marries and has a daughter in America. The novel then carries us to the final stage of this fourth generation, tracing the restless, unending quest for the original root and the lost homeland.

As the family's youngest members grow up, they stumble upon Atef's secret letters—letters in which he had confided the torments of his soul to his friend and his wife's beloved brother, Mustafa. In discovering these letters, they come to understand much about the unspoken presence that had inhabited their family's life, overshadowing it like a black genie that never ceases to stir in the dark. Atef's letters, a perhaps semi-traditional narrative device employed by Alyan, recreate the hidden links between the four generations and open windows between what might seem like mute walls separating each generation from the next. Through these windows and the glimpses, they afford exile, coercion, estrangement, death, and the density of past events appear as if still fresh, hot, and deeply salted.

On the contrary, Alyan highlights the fundamental dilemmas and traumas of confronting the harsh conditions under occupation, stemming from a fragmented and shattered identity due to exclusion and negative stereotypes. Despite Salma's anxieties about the tense situation, she tried to inject some vitality into her voice: "Children, protect each other from trouble" (Alyan, 45). They laughed shyly, looking away. A few months earlier, they had been arrested at a Jerusalem demonstration. In another time, their offense might have resulted in a fine or a mere court

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warning, but the situation quickly took a different turn. Salma realized then that they were both widows.In the finale of *Salt Houses*, the effects of loss and trauma are depicted not only as incidental things encountered by the Yaqoub family but also as a fundamental component that shapes their experiences and identity over generations. The novel, covering the years 1963 to 2014, narrates the experiences of a Palestinian family enduring continuous displacement, fleeting stability, and a reconnection to their origins, deeply illustrating the psychological and social disintegration resulting from occupation and exile. Alyan illustrates how the forfeiture of homeland evolves into an enduring yearning and a quest for belonging that family members, regardless of their locations in Kuwait, Paris, or Boston, are unable to entirely restore despite their continual efforts to establish new lives. The work elucidates both social and individual trauma; significant events like the 1967 war and ensuing conflicts irreversibly imprint entire generations with visions of horrific loss, influencing personal and collective memory in the characters' daily lives.

Ultimately, rather than concluding in a conventional manner, the novel imparts to the reader a profound comprehension that exile transcends mere geographical displacement; it constitutes a deeply entrenched psychological condition that is not alleviated. Furthermore, the concept of true home may reside more in memories and narratives than in a physical location on a map. Alyan asserts in her novel that loss and trauma transcend mere narrative themes; they are pivotal forces that influence the characters' fates and persist in their deepest moments long after the events have transpired, rendering the novel a profound literary exploration of alienation, exile, and the quest for identity.

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