



**RECONSTRUING PALESTINIAN MIGRANT WOMEN
IN HALA ALYAN'S POEMS *HIJRA* AND *FATIMA***

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Abstract

*Hala Alyan, a Palestinian American, is antagonized with multi-linguistic and multi-cultural experiences and speaks about the history, dilemmas, disenchantments, and ambivalences of her people. This article demonstrates the interconnectedness of diaspora, trauma, homeland versus host land, and nostalgia. Such hyphenated identities are two separate dispositions attempting to coexist within the same individual. It projects the psychological effects of exile, trans-generational trauma, and collective memories on Alyan's life. This is reflected in her poems *Hijra* and *Fatima* which is analysed through the lens of acculturation. This article tries to validate how identity is a dynamic concept and evolves with time experiencing changes from childhood, teenage and into adulthood in the poems. The formation of her hyphenated identity serves as a way to foster communication between different cultures.*

Keywords

Diaspora, Acculturation, Hyphenated Identities, Marginalized Palestinian Women, etc.

Full Article

Palestinian- American Hala Alyan faces linguistic diversity alongside cultural differences in her life stories, discussing issues such as historical events, moral quandaries, disillusionment, and mixed emotions pertaining to her community's heritage. Despite three decades passing by, she remains ensnared in her memories; this reflects on how exiles' traumas linger among survivors while being transmitted across multiple generations as well. *Hijra* is her third poetry book which explores themes of displacement through narratives tracing generations' migrations between Palestine and Turkey. Its lyrics depict an episodic exploration by disenfranchised female figures grappling with the harsh realities of warfare and migration's cruelty. This isn't merely an isolated affair; it's part of a broader phenomenon affecting the international immigrant population.

The title *Hijra* denotes Muhammad's relocation from Mecca to Medina as his prophetic journey. The core theme in Alyan's work revolves around the transformation process - moving across an undefined threshold between known territories and unfamiliar landscapes. This concept of personal giving is placed on these female figures at the heart of Arab societies, serving as protectors against their hardships. These females exhibit tenacity, courage, eloquent expression, flexibility in circumstances, and influence extending through time, space, and familial lines. These female-authored writings about being exiled explore their vanished heritage through mourning and safeguarding historical accounts and narratives. Therefore, this serves as an acknowledgment of both individual identity and female presence among those who have been forcibly removed, often going unnoticed frequently.

Her poems abound in poetic language and vivid visual metaphors conveying profound emotions and intense sensations. Through perseverance and resilience, they cultivate their identity by shaping themselves over time. Through narrative forms like prose and confessionals, these works depict how spatial boundaries transform, spread out, and are recalled in memory. Alyan



dives into the themes of identity's fluidity through fantastical elements in an apocalypse setting, examining how individuals must endure their displaced state. As a Palestinian American female author, she has experienced numerous diaspora transformations throughout her life, which significantly influence her poetic expressions through their portrayal of personal experiences, narratives shared by others, and interactions among listeners. Divided into four sections, this compilation serves as an exploration of history's progression, presenting new perspectives on what it means to be a diaspora-woman today.

The name alludes to an Islamic concept related to movement and travel; it serves as the narrative framework through which Alyan explores the experiences of her community's exodus across borders. Her role involves speaking for those who have been marginalized within the Arab world community. Boundaries may exist in various forms such as spatial limits, governmental delineations, events spanning time periods, tangible actions taken by individuals, mental states of mind, feelings within emotions, or transcendent aspects like faith or consciousness. In an attempt to establish a reflective connection between these themes through their shared experiences of trauma and isolation, she endeavors to create awareness about them. Her view on crafting poems is seeing it as an interaction with audience leading to emotional recovery due to trauma and strategies for redefining and reshaping societal expectations around gender norms. Our primary goal is to dismantle neoliberals' ideology and prioritize nurturing human labor within an alternative societal framework after its dominance has waned.

The construction of the migrant identity is linked to collective memory of home culture and alien culture too. Their exilic identity engages with the geography, history and traumatic experiences of homeland. It tackles the aftereffects of trans generational trauma and collective memories of these migrants. Thus, the past will also affect the subsequent generations and they will be permanently haunted by such displacement. It has evolved to a global problem affecting every one's lives. Therefore, globalization has increased its causes such as colonization, war, political unrest, tyrannical rulers, economic factors, and poverty. There are lot of questions that can be raised here. Is there a connection between migrants, their traumatic memories, belonging, and nostalgia? And do they affect their persona physically, psychologically and socially? How does trans-generational trauma shape the migrant identity of the coming generation? What is the change that can be seen through the poetry of Hala Alyan? This paper tries to show how identity is a dynamic concept and evolves with time experiencing changes from childhood, teenage and into adulthood in *Hijra* and *Fatima*.

Hijra underscored her deep connection to Arab heritage and her duty towards their ancestral tongue. In her poetic works, she incorporates numerous Arabic terms to preserve both her linguistic heritage and cultural identity within them. According to renowned Palestinian scholar Edward W. Said (2000), he argues that perhaps the most significant struggle for Palestinians is securing their rightful place in history through remembering who they were and what they experienced collectively. In an unstructured manner, she composes the poem using free verse form while giving it its unique visual interpretation through personal expression. In her poetry, she employs an alternating pattern of longer and shorter lines to intricately explore its themes deeply.

Sleepwalkers, uterus dust, you heard the gunfire
and folded into clay. We begged our bodies for
alchemy, death into new lungs; we fed bread
to the jinn. The clouds followed us, a scrap
of summer moon as gazelles made a meal of ash (Alyan, 15).



The poet speaks to those in limbo—refugees barely conscious like drugged infants—and future generations yet unborn, embodying them both without distinction: suffering alongside their parents' struggles while not truly existing themselves. During a conversation with Jacqueline Alnes, Alyan asserts, "Something that happened way before you were born can have a direct influence on you and how you move through the world." (March 5, 2021). In her narrative, she employs the term "us" to signify it's an inclusive shared encounter, while being plagued by recollections of individuals who experienced similar hardships. The term "alchemy" implies that the refugees seek to alter their beliefs and embark on a fresh start, much as alchemy transforms material substances into something else. Alyan employs Arabic terms translated into English through this method of establishing communication across cultural boundaries. Additionally, it symbolizes her dual nature. The term she employs is "jinn," an Arabic expression denoting a being residing in forsaken locales. In these verses, the cloud formations symbolize the spiritual sustenance available to those exiled spiritually.

We became seamstresses, mapping departure
into our eyelids. Allah's calligraphy stitched
our vertebrae. We wrote their unsaid names
on parchment, buried them in boxes, gave birth
to our daughters in caves. When our breasts wept
milk for months, we drank it ourselves. (Alyan, 15).

This elucidates how these female artisans stitch the word 'Allah' into intricate designs upon their garments as it serves them as their sole guardian. In place of God, she employs the term "Allah," signifying both her Arab heritage and adherence to Islam. These Palestinian women depart due to conflicts and devastation as they perceive their homeland unsafe. To them, houses serve both as an individual sanctuary and as a communal emblem representing their ethnic identity; they lack resilience and permanence in this regard. The issue extends beyond merely losing dwellings; it encompasses difficulties in acquiring replacements as well. Consequently, their sense of spirituality extends beyond mere material existence into intangible realms. As Danny Rubinstein justly states in his prominent book *The People of Nowhere* (1991), "Every person in the world lives in a place, except the Palestinians, The place lives in them" (Rubinstein, 195).

At the end of the poem the speaker describes the height of the suffering of the pregnant women who give birth to their children in the caves. They starve to death and live in appalling conditions. Where they drink their own milk to fill their stomach. This poem tells how painful experiences and collective memories influenced the poetess. The use of gloomy visual images of people in pain and panic shows that migration is not a positive experience; it is a death in life. These memories are passed down from generation to generation, most obviously through stories told or written, but also more subtly through the musings of parents or grandparents.

An important term in migration studies related to such cultural experiences of an immigrant is acculturation. It can be defined as a process of social, cultural and psychosocial change and adaptation that appears when two or more cultural communities and their representatives come into contact leading to the formation of different identities. This method specifically refers to the adoption of the beliefs, principles and customs of the host society. It also involves preserving the ideas, values and beliefs of an immigrant's native culture. For Berry and others, migrant individuals use acculturation strategies and attitudes to cope with new socio-cultural situations. According to Berry, collectively existing individuals and groups are at odds with two matters that are critical to the acculturation process: newcomers' desire to protect their



heritage and their desire to maintain affiliations with primary/host group affiliates, to contribute to the everyday life of the larger society (Berry, 2008).

Alyan's another poem, *Fatima*, from the same collection, evokes memories of her grandmother's experiences. She painted a portrait of her grandmother, who was living in exile in the Midwest of the United States. The title embodies the name of her grandmother, symbolizing her deep connection to her. According to Alyan, *Fatima* serves as a bridge connecting the past, present, and future. In an interview with Meredith Boe, "*Fatima* was my maternal grandmother and one of the true, enduring loves of my life. She was gentle and fierce and a conduit between the past and the future." (February 7, 2019). The poem, composed in free verse, is structured into three stanzas. It employs a blend of long sentences, which are descriptive and convey *Fatima*'s estranged experiences in the US, and short sentences, which provide specific details and memorable elements. The speaker starts by recounting her experiences of feeling isolated in the United States, where she notes that "The birds have a different aubade here, of revival and dominion. Along the Midwest, a hallucination of highway light after light as signs blur by. (Alyan, 32). The birds in the United States have distinct melodies from those in her residence. These tunes signify strength and control, not love ballads, and she feels homesick and yearns for her native land. She wanders aimlessly through the desolate Midwestern streets, plagued by thoughts of her native land.

Helena Schulz discusses how the memories of the homeland are firmly embedded in the minds of the diaspora individual. In her 2005 book titled *The Palestinian Diaspora*, she asserts, "the homeland in the mind remains forever as it was. There is no change." (Schulz, 97). The dispersed individuals frequently reminisce about their dual heritage; their recollections of their homeland will remain etched in their minds, despite the harsh present and the uncertain future. The speaker elaborates on her distress in the Midwest region. Juliane Hammer (2005) notes that the Palestinian's plight in exile "is al-ghurba, where the Palestinian is a stranger, that carries all the notions of suffering, cold, winter, estrangement, and dislocation" (Hammer, 60). She perceives this town as desolate and devoid of meaning because her physical presence resides in the Midwest, whereas her spiritual essence is in the Middle East.

In the second stanza, the speaker views the Midwest as a morally corrupt society that ultimately corrupts her daughters' morals: "Amrika is the pink meat we fry in oil to crisps.// My daughters grow fleshy and cunning." (Alyan, 32). In 1968, she employed the term "Amerika" to denote the fascist or racist elements within American society. She personifies American society as "pink meat," representing both an impending era of challenges and being overshadowed by others. She, as an Islamic woman, is concerned about the impact of new norms on her daughters and is worried about them growing up in the shadow of a fascist society. In the last stanza, the speaker says: "They speak of barbarity like a hope, fat stars anchored in lanterns for Allah to see." (Alyan, 32). In this line, she clarifies that her daughters see the breakdown of Western society as a source of hope and personal liberty, and uses the words "fat stars," which stand for moral shortcomings and sins where Allah sees everything.

The speaker opts to substitute "Allah" for "God" to embody her Arabic Muslim background. She experiences a sense of disintegration of her identity due to unresolved past memories and the unbearable intensity of current painful experiences, as described by the imagery: "The cold twists my bones into a nest, and the window becomes a creek of fingers." (Alyan, 32). The speaker compares herself to a bird (a metaphor) cocooned in a nest due to feelings of hopelessness, grief, and depression. She experiences a sense of isolation and estrangement within her society, caught between the past and the present. Hala Alyan experienced a challenging upbringing, similar to many Palestinian children who live in the term al-ghurba in Arabic. She migrated with her family to various locations in the Middle East and Midwest.



For Avtar Brah, the concept of diaspora serves as a critique of static ancestry narratives, examining a homing impulse that differs from the longing for a "homeland. Thus, homeland took on a homely quality, and soon, the home itself transformed into a placeless yet poetic space. As per Brah, "'Home' became increasingly vague, even miasmatic. By contrast, her concept of diaspora 'offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins, while taking account of a homing desire, which is not the same thing as a desire for "homeland"'. So, homeland had become a homing desire and soon home itself became transmuted into an essentially placeless, though admittedly lyrical, space". (Brah, 192)

Homi Bhabha introduces three pivotal ideas in his book *Location of Culture: Hybridity, Mimicry, and Third Space*. His first argument posits that a novel hybrid identity or status emerged from the fusion of elements from the colonizer and colonized, challenging the authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity. Hybridity serves as a counter to essentialism, "the belief in invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity" (Bhabha, 1994). The second concept, Mimicry, manifests when members of a colonized society adopt and incorporate the colonizers' culture (Bhabha, 1984). Lacan posits that the mimicry effect serves as a form of camouflage. It is not a matter of blending with the existing context but of standing out against a patchy backdrop. Colonial mimicry arises from the colonist's longing for a reformed, recognizable Other as a subject of difference, as Bhabha suggests, "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994).

The Third Space emerges as a nebulous space when multiple individuals or cultures converge. It "questions the notion that culture is a unified, homogenizing force, shaped by the past and preserved in the national heritage of the people". In his 1996 article 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', the theoretician Stuart Hall said that that "cultural distinctiveness is not only a question of a 'being' but of 'becoming', belonging as much to the future as it does to the past". Individualities endure a continual alteration, transcending time and space." Hall asserted the line amid "intellectual pessimism and ahistorical optimism, all the time opposing an imposing and authoritative perception." (Hall, 1996). The process of migration has aided individuals to grow precipitously on the social ladder. But they also struggle relentlessly to construct their identity in the new land. The mental pressure to adapt in the new environment is more complex and intricate than the physical displacement. It also embodies a sense of violence and political and economic upheaval and insecurity. The gradation of separation and nostalgia from the homeland, and firsthand knowledge of it, further compounds the matter of spatial depth. This affects their psychological attitude as it is a journey of restructuring the socio-cultural existence of a person and its more traumatic for women.

Consequently, migrants are a blend of cultural quandary and psychological seclusion. An essential element for them is its bond with its homeland. This is the place where one's origins lie and where the foundation of one's identity is rooted. It encompasses numerous memories, stories, and unspoken tales that contribute to an individual's identity. Therefore, these ideas are evident in Hala Alyan's poetry. This piece highlights the interdependence of diaspora, trauma, home, and nostalgia. These hyphenated identities represent two distinct personalities trying to live together in the same person. It highlights the psychological impacts of exile, intergenerational trauma, and shared memories on Alyan's existence. The inquiry: where am I situated? Influences her mind profoundly, these memories also significantly dominate her writings and her life. The formation of her Arabic identity serves as a way to foster communication between different cultures.

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