



## Fractured Memories, Lost Identities and Dreadful Displacements in Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*

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### Abstract

Hala Alyan's debut novel *Salt Houses* focuses (2017) on the struggle of Palestinians, their domestic dislocation, cultural conflicts, identity crisis and the trauma of war both inside and outside the national border. This multi-layered, multi-generational story projects the loss and pain of the Yacoub family in the most unsettling times. It covers almost five decades and five generations to unfold the trauma that is inflicted by war, invasion and political disturbances.

Key words: home, trauma, war, identity, displacement

The story begins in 1963; fifteen years after Salma and Hussam left their home in Jaffa with their three children Widad, Mustafa and Alia, during the Israeli War of Independence to rebuild a new life in Nablus. The sense of loss is reflected through each character vividly from the very beginning of the novel. Salma recounts the loss of their home and belongings while walking through the marketplace 'in an unfamiliar city', "It was a silver tray that gave Salma pause, the triangular pattern so familiar to the one her own mother gave her when she first wed. But it was gone, the old tray and coffee set, along with so many of their belongings, the dresses and walnut furniture and Hussam's books. All left behind in that villa, painted the colour of peach flesh, that had been their home" (1). In the case of Hussam the trauma was more internal in nature and intense as well, he cried more than once in the night, "They took my home, they my lungs. Kill me, kill me" (3). For the children their father was a changed man in Nablus, no more the smiling and loving person they had in Jaffa, "their father in Nablus was a transformed creature, cheerless and short tempered. No longer made growling sounds when he was hungry, mimicking a lion or bear until they

giggled...now when he spoke with Widad or Mustafa he seemed to be unfocused. Every evening he listened to the radio raptly." Their eldest daughter, Widad, was sixteen years old, when they left Jaffa. But never been the same again in their new home. Salma says, "She walked around their new house in Nablus wanly, sat through meals without speaking. She never mentioned Jaffa, even when her father, already ailing, told her it was time to marry, she didn't protest"(4). The man who was chosen for Widad by her parents was someone from Kuwait. And one who can take Widad "far from the blazing country split in two" to keep her safe. But Salma was not able to protect her younger daughter from the same displacement that she experienced in her life. when her second daughter, Alia requests her mother to read the cup and predict the future before her wedding. Salma sees displacement and travel in the form of a crumbling edifice – a sign of "houses that will be lost" – and the form of a zebra, the harbinger of an "unsettled life." But to protect her daughter from that she tells Alia that her fiancé loves her and that she will soon be pregnant. But as her mother could foresee there are multiple displacements that Alia has to experience in her life.

The whole idea of living a life with a sense of displacement, the implications and the entirety is presented in detail in this novel through different chapters. In the first chapter "Salma missed her home with a tenacity that never quite abated. She spent the first years in Nablus daydreaming of returning. . . a miracle, everything as she'd left it, even the damp laundry she'd never gotten to hang up"(6) The second chapter depicts Israeli invasion of Nablus and soldiers driving people out of their homeland is described in Alyan's words as "They have even taken our deaths. They have robbed us even of dignity"(44). Each chapter is like a transition and presented through a specific character. The third chapter starts in 1967 in Kuwait. Salma's older daughter, Widad, has already moved to Kuwait after marriage. When the Six-Day War breaks out in 1967, Alia happens to be visiting Widad in Kuwait City. But her husband, Atef, and beloved brother, Mustafa remain trapped in Palestine along with other activists. Only Atef survives the war but the trauma of the war haunts him for years affecting his family life. Unlike her sister, the independent-minded Alia has married Atef, a professor whom she loves. Their difficult marriage becomes one of the novel's most discussed elements. They create a life in Kuwait with their three children Riham, Karam, and Souad until the 1990 Iraq-Kuwait war forces them to flee to Amman. The subsequent chapters are set in Amman, Kuwait, Beirut, Boston, and Jaffa and reflected by a character's shift in identity. After the Gulf War, Riham, Alia's elder daughter, went to Amman. Riham was more religious than her other siblings but spiritually exhausted and at one point we can find her unstable; she had a fractured identity, her memories and experiences of refugees at the backside of her house, where her husband used to treat refugees free of cost. Alia's son, Karam is sent to attend college in Boston and becomes an American. He spends summers with his kids in an inherited apartment in Beirut. Souad, the younger daughter of Alia and Atef also tries in her attempt to create a life Paris, studied there during the Gulf War, she married her boyfriend, moved to Boston with her brother Karam but never feels at home in America. After her divorce, she moves to Beirut, where she re-builds a life with her children Manar

and Zain. when asked by her children about the reason for moving to Beirut Souad, says 'Home as in somewhere familiar, somewhere people look like us, talk like us, where you guys can learn Arabic and be near your grandparents and never came home asking what raghead means' (207). Souad's struggle for her identity and to feel a sense of belongingness is evident when she finds herself thinking of saying when asked about her origin, "Yes she'd lived in Kuwait, but no, she wasn't Kuwaiti, and no she had never been to Palestine, but, yes, she was Palestinian" (129). Her concept of identity was associated with the homeland of her father, "she sees as rampant assimilation; everyone, no matter their family's place of origin, responds with "here" when asked where they're from. But for Palestinians, she thinks,"even if a person's heritage was flimsy, unused for years. . .you were where your father was from."Alia's children and their children adapt Western influences, dressing like Americans and never quite learning Arabic. Such cultural differences cause a gap between the generations, but their shared history keeps them connected.

The common element between these characters is the concept of 'home'. They always try to create a home and feel the comfort and sense of security there. The plot of the novel runs through Nablus to Kuwait to the USA and then to Lebanon. But despite their affluence and being privileged in so many ways, each of the characters lack the sense of belongingness. Constant search of 'home' is what each character is indulged in the novel. There is no permanence when it comes to the concept of 'home'. The family has been uprooted time and again for generations together due to circumstances which are beyond their control. The central idea that runs through the plot is the sense of displacement, lost identity and a longing towards 'home'. We can find the characters dwell in two space time dimensions; one is always in the past and the memories from the past and the other in the present. Atef recalls the past and shares stories from their past homes with his grandchildren, Zain and Linah about their grand house in Palestine as "Your grandmother used to stay in a house with a garden. In Palestine with her brother..." "A good house. There

was a table under the trees. In summer, we'd sit out there for hours" (273).

Both Alia and Atef think of Palestine with love and longing "Here is Palestine. Here are the streets we'd walk in Nablus, the neighborhood we grew up in. Here is everything we loved " (271). Alia makes it clear with her words "Nostalgia is an affliction. Someone said that once in front of Alia and the words reach her now, years later. Like a fever or cancer, the longing for what had vanished wasting a person away. Not just the unbearable losses, but the small things as well. Alia thinks of her bedroom in Nablus. The seashells she filled with bobby pins. The tangerine dress she'd bought right before her trip to Kuwait and never worn. Photographs, necklaces, the glasses and silver ibrik her mother had given her "(74). Being treated and felt like refugees for decades in foreign lands is unthinkable for most of us but this is what they have to experience again and again after their lives being disrupted from one place to another. This shift of 'home' is presented neatly through different characters living in different places of the world, Saud is living in Beirut, Budur in Boston, Abdullah in London, Manar in Manhattan and Linah and Zain in Vermont. And also Atef's recount of different houses as his mother's hut in Nablus, the house he shared with Alia in Nablus, the house in Kuwait, the house in Beirut and the house in Amman is another example of homelessness as well as building and rebuilding 'home' once it is taken by the war.

The title *Salt Houses* justifies the significance of a 'home' in a war stricken zone. The homes are never permanent and perishable like salts in water. Alyan put it more clearly through Atef's words, "They glitter whitely in his mind like structures of salt, before a tidal wave comes and sweeps them away (273)". The author has brilliantly delineated the experience of people who have lost everything to war. Her own family had the similar kind of experience and keeping that in mind Hala Alyan in one of her interviews says, "When I wanted to get married, one of the things that I didn't really have the luxury of was ... asking my mother if I could wear her wedding dress, or asking my grandmother if I could wear her wedding dress. ... My grandmother lost hers when she moved to Kuwait.

My mother lost hers in Kuwait after the invasion. ... They're lost in the rubble of time and movement and displacement. ... We don't have heirlooms." Through her novel *Alyan* portrays how Palestinians not just lost their home and homeland but also their nationality and identity with it. The main thing that is discussed in the novel is not just the depiction of the wars but the horrible conditions and dreadful consequences of the wars that the innocent refugees endure. They become the victim of forced banishment from their homeland. Almost all the characters in the novel are found running away from wars to secure themselves from the death and destruction of the wars. As the consequences of the war, they are forced to leave one state to another state. All the characters of the *Salt Houses* remain without any definite identity throughout the novel. Alyan describes that the war of 1948 in Palestine caused the crisis of identity of Yacoub's family for the first time, and after that one after another their identity is snatched time and again with different wars in different times. This paper highlights how the four generations suffer the homelessness and how the clash of cultures shape and reshape the identity of characters in the novel.

*Salt Houses* is not just about the trauma and displacement of the Yacoub family but also about the struggles of millions in war-ravaged lands. But more precisely, it's about the significance of "home"; what it means to build a home, to lose it, and again rebuild it, and to go home when nothing looks or feels the same. Each generation of Alia's family remembers their birthplaces with fondness, even as their parents, forced from their own places of birth, resent the cities they move to. Wars play a very crucial role in shaping and reshaping the identity of almost the whole Palestinians inside and outside the national border. Alyan represents the struggle of refugees beyond the refugee camps. The family discussed here is without any experience of camps and deprivation yet despite being privileged they feel the emptiness and lack of belongingness for generations together.

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