

## Threads of Identity: Tracing Historical Loss and Resilience through Generations

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### Abstract

Intergenerational trauma—the notion that one traumatic experience can be passed down to successive generations—remains an ever-expanding subject of psychological discovery. The existing research is relevant to the realities of war and displacement, which concern refugees who suffer from emotional impacts in their respective wars and displacements. Hala Alyan's writing, *Salt Houses* (2017), is one form of intergenerational trauma concerning Palestinian families experiencing hardships after the Arab-Israeli War (1948) and the Six-Day War (1967). The article returns to the question of representation, considering the psychological impact of displacement and a desire to return to home.

**Keywords:** Trauma, War, Psychology, Displacement, Home.

### Introduction

Palestinian-American writer Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses* explores the multiple displacements experienced by a Palestinian family due to two major historical conflicts: the Arab-Israeli war in 1948 and the Six-Day War of 1967. The characters of *Salt Houses* are uprooted again and again, either as a consequence of war and political conflicts, or because they are on a quest for a sense of belonging elsewhere. People who have suffered a severe mentally taxing situation seek a fresh start, a chance to wipe their past clean and begin a new life in a strange place. The family members attempt to lead separate lives in various corners of the world, but this only serves to reiterate the importance of one's place of origin and how an individual must confront trauma instead of trying to escape from it. These narratives offer new perceptions into the state of affairs for Palestinians, both within Palestine and in exile, but especially the latter. The act of remembering a traumatic past has become a strategy for Palestinians to counter-assert settler-colonial efforts that deny them the right to return and obstruct their reclamation of memory. Cathy Caruth (1996) in *Unclaimed Experience* says that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way it's very unassimilated nature - the way it was precisely not known

in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on" (p. 4). The article argues that memory and suffering in real-time detaches characters from their present world, allowing them to re-experience past events. The transmission of trauma through time is problematic and can leave psychological scars on victims.

### Navigating Displacement and Heritage

In *Salt Houses*, Atef is haunted by the memories of his displacement from Nablus, a period of war and displacement. His trauma is reflected in his PTSD-induced flashbacks, which remind him of his past with pain and sadness. Trauma theory often regards these snippets of memories and flashbacks as psychological symptoms of an individual trauma (Caruth, 1996). Atef overcomes his trauma by writing about his experiences, giving voice to his wounded inner self. Salma's memories and stories of the "villa, painted color of peach flesh, that had been their home," (Alyan, 2017, p. 1) cements the family's lineage and historic connection to the land, while also marking Jaffa as a significant site of personal and traumatic memory. In an unsent letter to Mustafa, Atef reminds us that "Our mutiny [of the Palestinians] is our remembering.... This is what it means to be alive" (Alyan, 2017, p. 295). Atef sadly captures the memories of the

makeshift houses he left behind," The houses float up to his mind's eye like jinn, past lovers. The sloping roof of his mother's hut, the marbled tiles in Salma's kitchen, the small house he shared with Alia in Nablus. The Kuwait home. The Beirut apartments. This house, here in Amman. For Alia, some old, vanished house in Jaffa. They glitter whitely in his mind, like structures made of salt, before a tidal waves comes and sweeps them away". (Alyan, 2017, p. 273).

The concept of 'post-memory' coined by Marianne Hirsch is applied in the novel, as the protagonists often struggle to separate their memories from those of their previous generations. The importance of memory and time lies in Atef's descriptions of his inner life, personal introspection, and the world around them through acts of remembrance and flashbacks. Alyan's narrative vividly depicts the damage caused to the family's property and the trauma inflicted on their memories. The groves were mangled, and the men who worked for them were gone. Alia experiences nostalgia, a feeling that reflects the exilic consciousness of the Palestinians. Her memories of Jaffa are preserved from erasure and forgetfulness, tied to other characters' experiences. The concept of *lieux de mémoire*, as defined by Nora (1989), views the Mediterranean seashore and the Nakba as sites of memory. Hussam, born and raised as diaspora, inherits memories of Palestine from generations before them through post-memory.

### **Defiance, Roots, and the Strength of Collective Identity**

In '*Salt Houses*', Manar, a Yacoub family member, writes in the sand, expressing her defiance against the ravages of memory and affirming that her family's struggles have made a difference. She realizes that the land her family once owned no longer belongs to them, and she becomes a foreigner in her native land. Returning to Nablus is not just an act of remembrance but a powerful act of resistance and affirmation of the Palestinian will to return. The Yacoubian's memories are not mere nostalgia or recollections of a past event but an unfinished past that prevents them from living meaningfully in the present. The family's understanding of the homeland and the right of return is grounded in the past and future, causing them to live in solitude and a hollow, mentally isolated existence.

Manar uses photographs from Atef's letters to connect with her Palestinian heritage despite her limited grandparents' stories. She hopes to fall in love with

Nablus but fails to recognize the land's long history of displacement, war, and conflict. The family tree she draws on the sand symbolizes the family's historic claim to Jaffa and Nablus, highlighting the crucial role of memory in preserving the Palestinian collective identity: "we were all here.... She imagines her whole family standing on this shoreline, in a row" (p. 296). In addition, the name of each family member affirms their presence in the current moment, with Manar. In "The Web and the Reunion," Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer argue that "geographical and temporal distance, and the trauma of exile or expulsion, make it difficult to develop an integrated memory of a lost home" (2011, p. 84). The novel portrays how different characters see the world, one through a daring eye and another conservatively. It portrays how distinctive generations react to change. As one reluctantly refuses to permit the movement of the past, the other one is inclined to embody the change. Only by confronting their legacy of trauma do the Yacoubs obtain some form of emotional closure. Home is in the imagination of the dispossessed by analogy, the repeated experiences of dispossession and displacement suggest that Palestinian houses, like salt, are dissolvable and can be washed away by the waves of politics and catastrophe.

### **Summing Up**

The novel '*Salt Houses*' delves into the sudden and unpredictable violence in Jaffa, leading to mass displacements and disarray among Palestinian civilians. The narrative underscores the profound significance of the Nakba in the Yacoubs' personal history and the challenges different generations face in developing an integrated memory of a lost home. Memory, in this context, is not a pathological ailment but a cultural celebration of one's identity and a subscription to the collective memory of a people. The Yacoubs' experience of displacement and trauma is consolidated by preserved and transferred memories through oral and written testimonies intergenerationally. Palestinian identity is intrinsically connected to the land, and the desire to trace one's origins to a singular watan (homeland) is essential for human striving. The Palestinians' resilient refusal to forget the trauma of their predecessors under constant erasure makes the Palestinian claims for justice unique and their resilience admirable.

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