

## Displacement and Homlessness in Hala Alyan's Novel Salt Houses

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### ABSTRACT

*Through a literary analysis approach, this study investigates the themes of dislocation and displacement in Hala Alyan's novel, Salt Houses. The multi-generational saga of the Palestinian family cast into exile due to war, occupation, and political instability forms the backstory of Salt Houses. The study aims to explore different narratives of dislocation from the perspective of Alyan, i.e., the professional and emotional experiences of individuals, bearing in mind the psychology of forced migration creating the conflict between identity for the people in foreign lands. Close textual analysis investigates home fluidity, a broken sense of belonging, and the way characters navigate between memory and adaptation. Engaging with theories of exile and diaspora and trauma, the paper situates Salt Houses within a broader discourse of contemporary refugee literature, making the case for the novel's ability to appreciate the human cost of dislocation. This research holds that the novel reconceptualizes home as an ever-shifting construct created through loss, nostalgia, memory, and the restless pursuit of security.*

**KEYWORDS:** Displacement, homlessness, hala alyans, salt houses.

### Introduction

Displacement and homelessness are deep and recurring themes in contemporary literature, often depicting the emotional, psychological, and sociopolitical toll of forced migration. These themes especially emerge in works dealing with conflict, war, and the dislocation of entire populations, with particularly strong emphasis on exiles' twenty-fifth impressions on the psyche of the individual and the collective. In *Salt Houses* by Hala Alyan, the story of the Palestinian diaspora sits at the very center of the narrative, scrutinizing in detail the exiles' experiences of alienation, loss, and belonging. Following the trajectory map of a Palestinian family forced out of his homeland by war and political instability for generations of dislocation and fractured sense of home, it contends that dislocation flows from a physical absence-imposed exile from a geographical homeland-into social and emotional vacuums that such forced migration creates. As the family travels across different countries, from Palestine to Kuwait, Lebanon, France, and the United States, each generation grapples with the shifting sands of identity, burdened by the weight of their past and the uncertainty of an equally disturbing present and future.

Alyan used the theme of national trauma, as it relates to displacement, in such a way as to portray how the characters are tied to memories of longing for a home they can no longer claim. Through the exploration

of multiple generations, the novel examines how such forced migration affects cultural continuity, and identity formation, as younger generations are handed the burden of exile, though they have never lived in their ancestral homeland. When viewed through the scope of generations, displacement is seen as a continuous process rather than a standalone event, rendering the novel's theme of homelessness as an emotional and psychological state of being, rather than the absence of a physical place. In weaving together personal histories with larger geopolitical realities, Alyan casts a moving reflection on what it means to belong, how exile reshapes family and individual identities. An exquisite treatise for understanding the complex interplay between war, migration, and identity, the novel constructs a powerful vista for contemporary discussions about displacement and homelessness.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

In *Salt Houses*, an exploration of displacement encompasses more than just the loss of physical space; it extends to a fragmentation of memory, culture, and identity. Forcible movement from home involves much more than just a physical relocation; it leads to the severance of social ties, a rupture from one's roots, and displacement into an ever-changing world. The study attempts to delineate how Alyan's novel interprets these complex facets of displacement and how characters are placed within the interstice of past (the lost homeland) and present, marked by the uncertainty of exile. Following a literary analytic study, the research will explore how the symbolic, structural, and character development features of the novel speak wide-ranging social and political questions surrounding the real-life issues of homelessness.

### 1.2. Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to examine the depiction of displacement and homelessness in *Salt Houses*, focusing on how Hala Alyan uses literary techniques to explore these themes. Specific objectives include:

1. To analyze the ways in which the novel portrays displacement as both a physical and emotional experience.
2. To investigate the role of memory and nostalgia in shaping the characters' understanding of home and identity.
3. To explore how Alyan's narrative techniques—such as shifting perspectives and fragmented timelines—help convey the impact of displacement on individual and collective identities.
4. To examine the symbolic significance of the "salt houses" motif and its relationship to themes of home, loss, and memory.

## Research Questions

This study will address the following key research questions:

1. How does Alyan's *Salt Houses* represent the experience of displacement and homelessness within the Palestinian diaspora?
2. In what ways do the characters' perceptions of home and belonging shift throughout the novel?
3. What literary devices and techniques does Alyan employ to explore the psychological and emotional consequences of displacement and trauma?
4. How does the use of symbolism, particularly the motif of the salt houses, enhance the narrative's exploration of loss, home, and identity?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how *Salt Houses* contributes to the broader discourse on displacement, trauma, and the search for a place to call home in contemporary literature.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Postcolonial Theory: Identity, Loss, and Displacement

Postcolonial theory offers a valid context through which the workings of power woven into the fabric of experience in exile and displacement can be critically understood. This theoretical lens shows how colonizing histories and occupations shape lives and identities by displacing them. The Palestinian experience of displacement comprises a significant thematic strand in the novel *Salt Houses* as Alyan shows how this loss of homeland and struggle for self-definition occurs within a larger pattern of colonial violence and occupation. The dislocation of Palestinian people as an uprooting from their geographical and cultural spaces means that they have cut all ties with their ancestors and must learn to confront a fragmented identity, for Said (1978). The present theme of "exilic condition"-perhaps one of the central ideas in the postcolonial discourse-relates to the psychological and emotional trauma inflicted on a person due to severing of ties with one's homeland (Said, 1978). In postcolonial perspective, here the depiction of Palestinian exile would also involve critique of these bigger geopolitical forces leading to displacement and erasure of histories. The novel shows how these colonial, occupying, and migratory lives are uprooted at the personal level and create the need for a new identity in alien lands. True to the argument of Bhabha (1994), postcolonial subject caught in the two worlds has to occupy the third space of cultural hybridity where identity is negotiated at all times. It is clear in the *Salt Houses* characters, which struggle for preserving their cultural while they have to adjust to new surroundings.

## 2.2 Diaspora Theory: The Fluidity of Home and Belonging

The theory of diaspora can be another valuable lens through which to interpret *Salt Houses*, particularly with regard to dislocation and the search for home. Diaspora brings to bear the dispersed character of communities and, therefore, points out how individuals live both their cultural and social identities outside their homeland. The same can be viewed to an understanding of home as fluid, shifting, and often contested space (Clifford, 1994). The experience of a Palestinian family in *Salt Houses* recalls all that constitutes the diasporic condition as the loss of a home parallels a longing for continuity and belonging rooted in culture.

According to Cohen (2008), diaspora identities find the making in the interplay between nostalgia for lost homes and the necessity of making do with a new, mostly alien, space. The characters in Alyan's works experience this tension, since their identities are continually forged through "fragments" remaining from the homeland, but also forged in spaces of "shared exile and displacement" by such "hybrid" people. Those aspects of lives spent in foreign cities, lives punctuated with stays in refugee camps or born from boarding-house and guest-house accommodations define a life of hybridity: where home does not cease, but rather takes on the character of a home "with dual allegiance, marked by attachment or alienation".

Closely related are the diaspora studies in transmitting memory and identity from generation to generation. The characters in *Salt Houses* recall the accounts of Palestine and thus hand down memories to the youngest generations, who will henceforth classify themselves as belonging to a place they never saw (Glick Schiller et al., 1992). The generational divide still matters in analyzing the perception of home and belonging in the course of the different narration across the novel.

## 2.3. Trauma Theory: The Psychological Effects of Displacement

Displacement manifests in a wound-and vessel metaphor in *Salt Houses*, with trauma theory providing critical theoretical lenses for exploring such emotional and psychological appendages of dislocation. Forced migrations or exiles steal home and ruin lives, resulting in various forms of post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic anxiety, and grief. Trauma, according to Caruth (1996) and Freud (1917), ruptures the space of possibility through which trauma narrates its own story and denies the possibility of coherent memories of the other in the past. For these characters in *Salt Houses*, the trauma of location is not only a loss of home but of fragmentary personal and collective histories. As stated by Caruth, trauma can be subsumed under the idea as "delay" or "rupture" in time. Other events remain omitted and keep being dealt with by one person. Similar scenarios can be found in *Salt Houses*, where the trauma of exile is imbued by more than just the immediate impacts of violence and uprooting, but ultimately showcases its more long-

lasting impacts on the psyche of each character. By this, the novel symbolizes resurrection whenever past traumas seem to resurrect throughout the characters' lives in major ways, such as how decisions are made, how they relate to other people, and how individuals sense themselves. Indeed, such legacies of trauma are passed down to subsequent generations and influence their ability to create stable identities and hold emotional ties (Hirsch, 2012).

## **2.4 Narrative Techniques and Literary Devices in Displacement Narratives**

Adapting its multiple narrative strategies into the structure of a complex novel as *Salt Houses*, Hala Alyan thus finds inventive modes through which to delve into the problem of displacement and homelessness, capturing the multi-layeredness of exile across generations. Perhaps one of the most significant devices is the employ of fragmentation in the narrative structure, changing perspective from different family members over several decades. This effect parallels the disorienting and fragmented reality of forced migration, with individuals struggling in a disintegrated sense of identity-with-their lives uprooted repeatedly (Hassan, 2011). The non-linearity of the novel accords with this sense of instability, rooted in the disruption of time and memory that exile creates in an individual life. Moving back and forth across different time periods, Alyan illustrates how the past continuously seeps into the present, shaping the characters' understanding of home, belonging, and selfhood (Said, 2000)

In addition to its structure, *Salt Houses* is full of symbolism, chiefly with regard to the salt house motif. The salt house is a representation of home, in both physical and spiritual senses, as both a link with the ancestral past of the characters and, at the same time, loss and impermanence. Salt, that which preserves and erodes simultaneously, becomes a very good metaphor to the characters' experiences: the memory of home remains, but time and displacement slowly wear off their root-groundedness. This conflict between preserving and dissolving things is what the novel is for an exploration into exile: when characters refer to the past, they navigate their future in terms of an uncertain present that is often uncongenial to them.

Moreover, Allegory has embedded Alyan's prose in a very lyrical vein. With poetic imagery of emotion-laden worlds, such prose weaves the personal and collective histories of the characters: dislocation in its full weight. Inducing flavor-of-olives, wafting scent of jasmine, crashing waves against shores-all aspects rouse deep nostalgia for an imagined homeland that exists more in memory than reality. This perception to sensory experience argues for the meditation of the novel on how the displaced manage to cling onto cultural and familial whereas physical distance and time goes on to sever them. Another important technique is considered to be Inner space by Alyan as he expresses the inner thoughts psyche terrains of her characters and thus also exposes exile as more than mere geopolitical reality, an inward, emotional

plight (Al-Mahdi, 2019). Each one has a different way of dealing with the legacy of displacement-some mourn; others try to adapt, and some even deny-it to make sense for viewers less by the history of forced migration than by the heavy emotional portraits it will give of the endless burdens carried by voice generations. Through these narrative techniques fragmentation, symbolism, poetic imagery, and psychological depth Alyan crafts a powerful meditation on the meaning of home, the persistence of memory, and the enduring impact of displacement. *Salt Houses* ultimately illustrates that exile is not merely a physical condition but an ongoing emotional and psychological journey, one that shapes identities and relationships long after the initial moment of dislocation.

### 3. Literary Analysis of *Salt Houses*

In *Salt Houses* by Hala Alyan, with the Palestinian exile constituting the backdrop, displacement, identity, and trauma are intricately interwoven. This chapter offers a close literary investigation of the novel itself, looking into the narrative structure, the symbolic components contained in it, and other pertinent literary devices used to tackle these themes. It shall chiefly discuss how Alyan's employing fragmentation in narrative, symbolism, and character development reveal the emotional and psychological repercussions of displacement and homelessness.

#### 3.1 Narrative Structure: Fragmentation and Temporal Displacement

It can best be expressed that the *Salt Houses* novel writes in fragmented narrative structures while twisting between the parallel generations and more than one perspective. Therefore, this unsequential process simulates in the characters' lives a repeated uprooting of how time has been defined. The history of all family members can be followed over decades of the Palestinian displaced-from-their-homes-from-each-other to various stages of refugee life across the Middle East, often referenced to be in the context of events from the first-ever deportation from his or her homeland, Palestine. Through different points of view, Alyan, for example, shows the growing surprise of generations related by blood and exile as readers complete how many times they are forced to see how these traumas will be passed down and lived over time by members of the same family. The tornaberation also mirrors how memory becomes dismembered with the traumatic event. "Trauma really prevents any telling of the past -- much less a coherent telling", says Caruth (1996) in her trauma theory analysis. Therefore, *Salt Houses* characters remember incoherently and incompletely, reflecting the jigsaw of persons having to experience home and remember loss. All shifting vistas across the novel allow the reader to comprehend how the characters evolve in identity and how their notions of home are not ever established but always in flux. This dislocation in time

reveals that a home is not something static. It holds a mark of past trauma and continues adapting to the change in fair conditions.

The showcasing of exile's generational trauma from various points of view demonstrates the transmission and living of these experiences over time. The tornaberation also mirrors how memory is dismembered by traumatic modality events. As Cathy Caruth (1996) put it, "Trauma really prevents any telling of the past-much less a coherent telling." This is a concept fully realized in *Salt Houses*, wherein the characters recall fragmented, disjointed memories and in a difficult way try to connect with their past. For instance, one of the lead characters, Alia, is unable to reconcile memories with loss:

"She pictures it constantly, that first house, the one she was too young to remember properly. She imagines the colors of the tiles in the kitchen, the way the light must have slanted through the window in the afternoons. And yet, when she tries to be certain of any of these details, they shift, become something else entirely. Memory is slippery, unreliable."

While it will be configured between the missing state of external and internal dislocation, memory is never static, being comfort and distortion at the same time. Alia's children, too, gift this ambivalence to memory because the one homeland that they never really saw is added to the stories rather than lived experience of time.

This intergenerational legacy of trauma is narrated marked particularly in Riham's meditation on the instability of house:

"Home, she thinks, was a mirage, a trick of the mind. It had once been Nablus, then Kuwait, then Amman. It was a place she could describe in minute detail yet had never actually inhabited. It was the scent of jasmine, the sound of the call to prayer at dawn, the feel of her mother's hands brushing flour off her dress things that were not places at all."

The text goes on to establish that home is less about physicality and more about a sensory constellation of memory, cultural practices, and familial ties. For the exiled, according to the author, home is an ever-changing concept without any fixity. All shifting vistas within the novel allow the reader to comprehend the ever-changing character of home in the evolution of the characters' identities. What the zigzagging in time exposes is that home is not static but bears the scars of past trauma and goes on changing. One reminding concurrence gives the word 'displaced' the weight it deserves in Mustafa's mind:

“You think you can outrun it, the past, the weight of what has come before. But it follows, always. It sits in your bones, in the way you hold your shoulders, in the way your children look at you without knowing why they are afraid.”

Here, Alyan underscores how exile is not merely a geographical reality but an emotional and psychological state that persists across generations. The burden of displacement does not end with the first wave of refugees but is carried forward, shaping identities and relationships long after the initial moment of dislocation.

### 3.2. Symbolism: The Salt House as a Metaphor for Home and Loss

Almost literally, the salt house stands for one of the strongest symbols in *Salt Houses*: it symbolizes home and the inescapable reality of loss. The salt house is ancestral, tied to the life of the family before exile in Palestine. It represents a sense of stability and rootedness that has now been lost through displacement (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2013). To these families the salt house stands for the bitter reality of this loss: that it can never be wholly salvaged or returned to. Salt that preserves also bears a sensibility for permanence; salt can endure, and its enduring presence is marked by the absence of the original home it stands for. What really is a home, after all, except where you are mourned: “What is a home after all, but the place where you are mourned?” (Alyan, 2017, p. 245). This is where the bitter paradoxes of exile converge, showing most glaringly their contradictions. The salt house remembers a home that was never materialized in this world yet remains alive in the minds and hearts of all those displaced by such conditions. Again, Said (2000) states that exile is such a state of being, i.e., both as loss and willed act. The salt house is, thus, a symbol of the past and inescapably painful readjustment. The very contradictions of its meaning concentrate the bitter paradoxes of the exile. The salt house holds a memory of a home, no longer present in the material world, yet alive in the minds and hearts of those affected by displacement. It is a symbol of the endurance of cultures and of time that has worn away what was once full of life. For the characters in *Salt Houses*, the salt house is a storehouse of memories; it represents stability, continuity, and belonging, even as the characters must reconcile that memory with their new homes, often temporary and alien.

### 3.3 Character Development and Identity in Exile

Characterization in *Salt Houses* intersects with the entire nature of exile and home. Each character's development relates directly to their experience of displacement, wherein their sense of self undergoes radical developments. Differences of generation in response to displacement are perhaps most acute. For

the older generation, Palestine is a land lost, a memory never brought to full consciousness. The younger generation finds itself born into exile and has trouble understanding their parents' sense of longing for a home they have never known (Alyan, 2017).

Alia exemplifies this exploration of the psychological and emotional condition of displacement. A young woman experiencing the effects of war and forcible displacement, she constantly finds herself navigating the tension between the inherited memories of her homeland, Palestine, and the reality of her living environment in the diaspora (Hirsch, 2012). The journey is one of emotional fragmentation, reconciling all the memories of cultural heritage with the foreign and hostile demands of a different life. This character arc of Alia exemplifies the difficulty of really establishing a stable identity when one is uprooted from the homeland and has to adapt to the foreign. Alia's mother, Nadia, represents yet another generation still traumatized by exile, but with a stronger connection to the past, clinging to the memories of Palestine as much as she can to preserve her identity (Said, 2000). Her inability to assimilate into new environments resonates with the psychological difficulties many displaced people face as they struggle to let go of their homeland. Nadia's experience encapsulates the intergenerational transmission of trauma, where the burden of loss is transferred to the next generation (Malkki, 1995).

In contrast to Rasha, who is Alia's daughter and still born in exile, is a character for whom understanding the significance of her Palestinian identity is more distant. To Rasha, the tales of Palestine appear more as something distant, more like myths than as actual experiences ((Brah, 1996). Her character embodies the sense of alienation often felt by the younger generation, which has inherited all the memories of displacement but cannot connect to a place it has never set eyes on. This generational shift makes the identity not only fluid but also redefined with every passing generation. This process of becoming through time insists that every generation exist simultaneously in both memories of the past and in the living present modified by new circumstances.

### **3.4. Character Analysis**

#### **3.4.1 Alia: The Fragmented Self in Exile**

She is really at the emotional core of the book, and her character actually has a major psychological exploration of how exile would be experienced. In *Salt Houses*, Alia wrestles with a simultaneous pressure to sustain her Palestinian identity and adjust to life in foreign host countries. The internal upheaval has been so significant that it has resulted in a fractured emotional existence, moving back and forth with

memories of Palestine to the bitter suffering of the present life now. It is all the time defining one self for Alia, when the memory of a home that never can be returned to has that alienation of the diaspora. Internal struggle betrays the pain of leaving one's homeland and reconstruction of identity in an absence of stable and physical homes that can call home. Alia is a pretty big archetype-the archetype of exile, where one's own identity becomes fluid and fragmented. Yet the memories that crush the life out of the new identity one is trying to create become heavier and the pressure to continue the culture at home really adds to this stress. Some of that emotion flows into Alia's conversations with other characters, especially Nadia, Alia's mother, who seemed very much rooted in Palestine, unable to disentangle from the past. Centered on Alia's evolving identity, the novel further underscores the emotional consequences of uprooting and the inability to paint a consistent self when one finds him or herself uprooted.

### 3.4.2 Nadia: The Custodian of Memory and Loss

Nadia, Alia's mother, is the mother who belongs to the older generation, which has a very tight grip on the past. For her, attachment to Palestine is something more than a sentimental tie; memory actually becomes a means of preserving her identity against exile. For Nadia, home becomes something to remember, even though it is treasure that can never be regained corporeally. Perhaps the most telling evidence of displacement in her character is found in the deep psychological impact it induces: grief and trauma channeled into a kind of emotional preservation. While resisting Nadia's imperative to deny memory as a boundary of distance, this also continues to make her unable to completely embrace the task of living in exile by placing herself at a distance from the new surroundings.

Neither really adjusts to a new venue, yet the character of Nadia underlines the generational gap in terms of the experience about displacement. As she clings to the imaginary past, Alia tries to live between bittersweet memories and the prospect of starting a new identity. The attachment of Nadia to Palestine emotionally affects her relationship with Alia because while Alia goes towards a new future, her mother stays rooted in memory. The journey of Nadia shows how difficult it is to balance loss against adjustment and provide the psychological burden the preservation of cultural identity has to bear in exile.

### 3.4.3 Rasha: The New Generation's Detachment from the Past

Rasha is Alia's little daughter in the next generation as born into exile. Unlike her mother and grandmother, memories of Palestine are much less connected to Rasha, who has a rather detached sense of who she is. Stories of Palestine for Rasha are very distant and almost myths, and she'll know the emotional weight they carry for her family. Her character serves to underscore the alienation often felt by people born in the diaspora, who tend to live through the inheritance of exile trauma without actually having lived through what constituted that trauma. This is detachment, which for Rasha again mirrors the generational

shift in experience with exile, that for her, memories become all the more abstract and less pertinent to what the reality is in the life of the diaspora today.

Rasha's character, however, also depicts the tension existing between wanting to keep one's cultural identity and wanting to fit in with the new place. She's a more realist historian of her family's Palestinian legacy, which captures the tangled negotiation between two worlds the younger ones find themselves in as they grapple with the demands to belong: that of their parents' memories and that of their own lived experience in exile.

In summary, *Salt Houses* can be finally analyzed at the level of literary and character analysis to show how Alyan's exploration of themes in displacement and identity through narrative structure, symbolism, and character development becomes clear. The fragmented narrative seems to reflect the psychological fragmentation incurred by exile, while the salt house poignantly works as a metaphor for the losses and the preservation of home. The evolving identities the characters boast of highlight the emotional and psychological tolls inflicted on the loss of place, specifically pointing to generational exiled impact and the existential struggles with self-identification in the absence of a stable, physical home.

## **Conclusion**

At once deeply felt and deeply layered in meaning, *Salt Houses* by Hala Alyan portrays the Palestinian experience of exile: of displacement, homelessness, and quest for identity. This achievement comes with the depiction of the emotional, psychological, and generational trauma associated with forced migration through fragmented narratives with symbolic undercurrents and strongly developed characters.

Considering loss, home, and belonging as the central themes, one finds proof that displacement is a state not only of physical moving but also of deep emotional and psychological trauma that alters both personal and collective identity. The novel is disjointed in its chronology; time frames varying throughout past and present generations and alternating between various locations, aptly voicing the disorienting qualities of living in exile. The Salt House, which best symbolizes Alyan's concerns, speaks poignantly of the intertwined concerns of memory, loss, and preservation, shedding light on how a few tears shed for a vanquished home remain planted in the psyche of the displaced, even as the hardest of adjusters to standing homes. A salt house thus becomes a double-edged symbol of maintaining cultural continuity and recalling painful lessons that attest that the past will never be recaptured. Through the analysis of the key characters of Alia, Nadia, and Rasha, this paper illustrates the differences in the experiences of the displacement trauma between generations. Alia's fragile and vacillating sense of identity, Nadia's emotional link to a lost homeland, and Rasha's detachment from the past all suggest different ways of

seeing how exile affects people. While the older generation clings to memories of Palestine for their own identification, the younger generation often has to negotiate the problems of living between worlds—that is, maintaining ties to a homeland they have never known while attempting to make new lives in a foreign land. The novel's exploration of intergenerational trauma emphasizes that the effects of displacement are not contained to a single individual or moment in time but instead are passed down through memory, stories, and emotional experiences. *Salt Houses* contributes to an understanding of the eternal nature of exile, whereby the losing of the home evolves into a shared, inherited experience that continues to impose anguish on other generations. Alyan's exploration of these themes compels a consideration of the broader human experience of displacement in the context of the continuing refugee crisis plaguing the world. In conclusion, *Salt Houses* is not just an exiled Palestinian story; it is, beyond all, a universal exploration of the issues of belonging, the fragility of identity, and the burdening weight of memory through displacement. Combining postcolonial, diaspora, and trauma theories with depth and subtleties of character development and symbolism, Alyan offers a compelling literary meditation on the long-lasting consequences of uprooting from one's homeland and the difficult journey of finding home anew thereafter. In the course of this frame, displacement and homelessness suggested. *Salt Houses* serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience of the human spirit and the intricate ways in which we create and sustain our identities, even in the face of loss.

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