



RESEARCH PAPER

A Critical Analysis on Identity Crisis in Hala Alayan's 'Salt Houses'

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: January 25, 2019	This research aims for the study of identity crisis by highlighting the concepts; nostalgia, homelessness, dislocation, and cultural conflicts in the lives of dispersed, exilic and banished Palestinians by the explanation of Alyan's debut novel Salt Houses (2017). William Safran's diasporic theory is employed as a theoretical framework to analyze the issues which were faced by Palestinians diaspora communities for more than 70 years inside and outside the borders. This paper also provides the reasons to prove the significance of one's identity which stands for one's origin. It also claims that diasporic Palestinians always believe they are not and perhaps can never be fully accepted by their host societies and they are always considered as outsiders, enemies within country, others and strangers. This research also claims the issue of identity by portraying the mishaps in the lives of Palestinians from the first exodus in 1948 to contemporary period
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Introduction

This study addresses the issue of identity crisis that gives Palestinians the diasporic feelings; not only in other states but also in their own motherland. However, sense of displacement in the host countries is not always welcomed but also confronts the alienation or aggression from the majority population and finds themselves isolated from the rest of the society. The term *diaspora* means 'scatter' in Greek and it is associated with the banishment of Jews from Israel by the Babylonians. But now this word is used more generally to state any large migration of refugees, language, or culture.

Hammer (2009) argued that living in different countries, cultures, and settings has been influencing the identity of each Palestinian (p. 3). As well, they were always reminded of their impermanent stay in the host countries. The Palestinians have not been keeping a particular identity and international relationships. Since 1993, almost a hundred thousand Palestinians have returned through a peace process that has distressed the Palestinians with the perspective of their developments and purposes (Schulz, 2005. p. 3). Zaidan (2012) believes that there are six major events which strengthened Palestinian identity crisis; the 1936-1939 Arab revolt, 1948 Arab Israel-War, the economic situation from 1950s to 1960s was intensely uncertain, Six-Day War of 1967, the first Intifada 1987 and second Intifada 2000 and the Gulf War of 1991 (pp. 11-12).

This study provides a comprehensive idea of Palestinians' loss of true identity with the establishment of Israel state in Palestine which brought catastrophe, uprooted and dispersion of Palestinian people and emergence of refugee problems. The first part of the novel has been narrated in the perspective of 1963 and sets in Nablus where Salma, the wife of Hassam, dreams of returning to Jaffa, she imagines about her homeland which was divided by occupation. The second part starts in Nablus in 1965. It states the characters' conflicts with the Israeli soldiers in driving them out of their homeland. Alyan reveals this situation as "They have even taken our deaths. They have robbed us even of the dignity" (p.44). Part three begins in Kuwait city in 1967. Alia, Salma's daughter, travelled to Kuwait with her husband Atef. They have three children, a boy and two daughters. Alia's mother, Salma, moved from Nablus to Amman with her aunts, cousins, and friends during the Six Day War of 1967. Part four is set in Kuwait in 1977. Atef is troubled and haunted with memories of Mustafa, particularly, when they were in prison after the Israeli invasion of Nablus. The subsequent part has been set in Amman, Kuwait, Beirut, Boston, and Jaffa and related by a character's shift in identity, like Atef, Riham, Soud, Alia and Manar. They are the children and grandchildren of Atef and Alia. After Gulf War, Riham went to Amman Salma, sold her flat in Kuwait and bought a small house in Amman, Karam was in America and Souad was in Paris. In this regard, Souad has answered the question of Manar about home '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' (p. 207). Riham was spiritually exhausted and unstable; she had a fractured identity because of past memories drifted across her mind, hanging of her husband, and scenes of refugees. On the other side, Souad settled in Paris, studied there during the Gulf War, she married her boyfriend, moved to Boston with her brother Karam and finally stayed in Beirut with their children. Souad felt distress in Boston and she decided to return to Beirut. Alyan fantastically noticed this situation as "Here is Palestine. Here are the streets we'd walk in Nablus, the neighborhood we grew up in. Here is everything we loved" (p. 271).

The Palestinian writer, Alayan, struggled to redress the colonial attempts by their post-colonial discourses. Alayan's technique of diaspora writing permits her to raise the issue of identity at individual and national levels with the influence of wars. In this novel, Alayan attempted to define what 'identity' means to Palestinian growing up as a diaspora. This study explores how the four generations do suffer the homelessness in this novel and how do clash of culture shape and reshape the identity of characters in the novel.

Literature Review

Alayan, a Palestinian-American novelist and poet is living in Manhattan. She was born in the United States and practiced the despotic experience in different countries: Kuwait, Texas, Oklahoma and Lebanon. Her works *Hijra* (2016), *Atrium* (2012), *Four Cities* (2015) and *Salt Houses* (2017) were the representative of Palestinian lost identity and explain the dreadful diasporic condition of Palestinian in each corner of the world. Various scholars and theorists have presented their views and theories in this regard. Identity crisis, dislocation, homelessness, cultural conflict, racism and minority are the major aspects of diasporic literature. According to Safran (1991), diasporas exist in a triangular socio-cultural relationship with the host society and homeland (p. 372). On the other hand, Kins (1996) defined identity as "referring to the ways in which individuals and collectives are distinguished in their social relations with other individual and collectives" (p. 4). Mercer (1990) defined crisis of identity as "Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (p. 43). Cohen (1997) classified in five types: labour diaspora, imperial diaspora, the trade diaspora, and the cultural diaspora (p. 18).

Abro (2013) stated that in Ghada, Fatima was forced to leave everything belonging to her in her own homeland, Palestine. Her family felt that they had a home but soon they felt that they hadn't a homeland. It shook their root. Hanfi (2003) raised various questions about the Palestinians who were living away from their ancestral homeland and their relationship to both their ancestral homeland and host societies. She stated that the literature of Palestine is called the "Palestinian refugees". She called Palestinians as "diasporas", "forced and volunteered migrants", and "Palestinians abroad." Kiran (2013) argued that the identity of Pakistanis became more complex and endangered after the 9/11 incident ever before. Sharma (2013) declared that Lahiri (2003) briefly presented the story of immigrants, revolving around alienation and finding the self-identity. She portrayed the issues of multiculturalism and its impact on immigrant's identity in a host country. On the other hand, Saber (1976) asserted that the conflict is basically a cultural image which has been stained and misunderstood as a result of foreign occupations. Xie (2005) stated that new Chinese Diaspora in virtual communities raised the issues of identity crisis and challenges of their identity as an alien and outsider.

This novel is a revolt against the violation of Palestinians true right and identity with much pressing simultaneous matter of concerns regarding the new predicaments faced by Palestinian diasporic community after the dreadful events of 1948 and 1967 which not only changed the shape of Palestine state but also the identity of Palestinians. It is observed as an emotional cost of war and conflict to all humanity. As well, it describes how distance deprives people from being part of their loved one' (Arjit, 2017). Naseem (2017) presented Alyan's words as:

So I was going over different notes, and thinking about the themes that were most salient in the book, which words were repeated. Obviously there were houses, homes. And I thought about this one scene, where one of the characters talks about remembering all of the different houses that he and his family have lived in over the decades, and thinking of them as structures made of salt that the tide can come and erase. Salt houses. That was it.

Anonymous (2019) published comments that *Salt Houses* presented an interesting and vital perspective: the Palestinian diaspora and the heart rending tariff emigration took on those forced to ramble from state to state. Through the lived experiences of three generations of a Palestinian family, *Salt Houses* is asking the reader to confront the concept of home: where is home when you have been by war? Can a refugee establish a new settlement somewhere, even as one's own offspring neglect the values on which their culture is based? How does one have family nexus strained by continuous catastrophe? "Alyan's 'Salt Houses' is a family saga, although even the word 'saga' may be overly grand, since none of its characters are the makers of history: They are history's victims". These reviews and comments deal with the core issue of identity, being shaped by personal, cultural and political factors, in the context of interaction between Palestinian and host's culture. The present study looks forward to fill this gap. Therefore the novel merits an encyclopedic and comprehensive analysis, which has not been endeavor so far. The present study aims at taking care of the core issues of the quest for identity on the part of a Palestinians living in different host countries, in response to the experiences and observations, in the light of postcolonial theory.

Material and Methods

This study explores the way through which the study of issue of identity to be expressed through a special theoretical framework. This research covers various concepts in this methodology: First the work assures to develop the healthy understanding of the selected text. Second, the research in this text identifies some particular data supporting the research paper statement. Third, the researchers analyze the supporting data to get a comprehensive considerate of the text in the potential diaspora. Fourth, In light of purpose the researchers demonstrate the hypothesis and deduce the conclusion. This study applies Safran's (1991) diaspora theory on Alyan' novel *Salt Houses* (2017) referring to Palestinian diaspora. The aim of the paper is to focus on such issues like home and exile, identity crisis; and

shaping and reshaping of identity of Palestinian diasporic communities. This paper will map out the 'identity' as a matter of fact.

Scholars from various disciplines and conceptualization have been trying to explain the idea of 'identity'. It is a common to cite ethnicity, culture, language, religious and shared history as important components of identity. Baumann (2000), states "the idea of "diaspora" has been celebrated as expressing notion of hybridity, heterogeneity, identity fragmentation and (re)construction, double consciousness, fractures of memory, ambivalence, roots and routes, discrepant cosmopolitanism, multi-locationality and so forth" (p. 324). Cohen (1997) tentatively describes diaspora as communities of people living together in one country who "acknowledge that 'the old country' - a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore- always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions" (Preface ix). Mercer (1990) defines crisis of identity "Identity is an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty (p. 43). Edward (2000), takes exile as "exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistic ally comprehensible" (p. 174). According to historians, Karmi (2010) observes that all Palestinians are feeling this insight of a double dispossession of their bodies and their souls, with no acknowledgment of their history as a separate people or of their resulting sufferings (p. 2).

The term 'diaspora' itself was collaborated with negative connotations such as victimization, alienation, forced displacement, and loss. Safran (2005), associated diaspora with issues of "deracination, legal disabilities, oppression" (p. 36). As well as, Safran (1991) had pointed out that 'in several respects, the Palestinian diaspora resembles the Jewish and Armenian ones. Hundreds of thousands of Arab residents of what became the state of Israel were expelled, encouraged to flee, or impelled by conditions of hostility to leave" (p. 87).

William Safran(1991) is one of the first scholars to establish the main criteria of the classical theory of Diaspora. In his essay (1991) he described a number of Diaspora groups and classified them according to the following points: they or their forefathers have the experience of displacement from their origin homeland to two or more host lands, they have memories and cultivate a collective myth about it, they believe that they have not been accepted by host societies and perhaps can never be accepted, when circumstances becomes favorable they would return to their original homeland, they do best to restoration of the ancestral homeland and pray for its safety and they remain attach to its culture (p. 87). The study in hand with the concept of 'diaspora' (a postcolonial situation) given by Safran, aims to indent a methodological theoretic framework to inform the social trends of 'identity crisis' in Palestinian diasporic communities in diverse states of the world through the representation of various characters.

Results and Discussion

Most countries of the Middle East have been enduring the basic problem of their national identity. These states feel unable to define, project, and maintain a

national identity that is both inclusive and representative. None of the countries of the Middle East is homogeneous. They have numerous cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities. Yet they are unable in evolving a national identity that can reflect their heterogeneity. Arabs are internally dissimilar and, henceforth, a narrow prohibitive national identity. Palestine is on top of them because its identity is being injured continuously after the war of 1948.

Identity Crisis

Lost partially in 1948 and completely in 1967, gave birth and enhanced Palestinian identity as the whole. Alyan portrayed identity crisis as a major issue and theme of *Salt Houses* (2017) in such a way that it depicted the whole havoc bloody picture of Palestine and Palestinians as Alyan states "Everyone with Arab is morning" (p. 63). Alyan reveals Soud's scattered identity as, "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" (p.129). Alyan shows Palestinian's insecurity through Mustafa's words "They want us to Crumple, to surrender" and more "They want us to yield" (p. 26) Imam's words also explain this sever truth, "They've even taken away our deaths. They've robbed us even our dignity of death" (p. 44). ` Israeli soldier's questioning the Soud actually reveals the very dreadful identity of the Palestinians outside the Palestine border, "Why are you here" (p. 284) "When had her grandfather left Nablus" (p. 285). Linah's hearing the words "Military, shelling, security" (p. 242) from the news caster, during The Lebanon Civil War, depicts the entire comprehensive idea of identity crisis. The Palestinians were trapped inside Palestine and among different regional countries. Alyan gives a brief description of Souad's scattered identity as "Yes she'd lived in Kuwait, but no, she wasn't Kuwaiti, and no she had never been to Palestine, but she was Palestinian" (pp. 209-210). The constant search for somewhere called home is something that rings throughout the whole novel. Thus, Alyan portrays how Palestinians lost their homeland which is mere equal to lose their nationality and identity.

Cultural Conflict

Diverse cultures as well as religious cultures which have existed in historic Palestine, from the early Canaanite period onwards are manipulating Palestinian culture. The conversion and loss of their homeland in the dreadful incidents of 1948 and 1967 took the Palestinian culture towards the transnational culture.

Alyan depicted the interaction between Palestinian and American culture which had a direct impact upon Palestinian people, culture and their identities. Alyan offered her explanation on the issue of tension between Palestinian and American culture. Mustafa has been described as a metaphor for Palestinian culture that stands for the Palestinians' determination to stick with culture, historical and ideological past. This attitude is responsible for the present love-hate relationship between the American and Palestinian culture. Alyan broadly explained the downfall of Palestinian culture in host lands as Imam Bakri tells Mustfa, "And our

men? They dance to American music and kiss girls in pool hall. They tell themselves that Palestine is this" (p. 44). Alyan reveals that new generation and elders are experiencing this conflict but the result of this interaction proves against the safety of Palestinian heritage. She shows that the root cause behind the cultural conflict is severe and negative American policies against Palestinians in Palestine since 1948. Alyan revealed home as a symbol of culture and identity. According to her, when home changes its location; it causes cultural conflict. The uneasy cultural relationship between Alia and Abdullah represents the complex and complicated equation that exists between Palestinian and American cultures as the cultural interaction between both Alia and Abdullah where Abdullah says, "most of them more American than Arabs" and more "Arabs go over to the West, fall in love with their fake gods, their starlets, and music stars, and drink their poisoned water" more says "We lose our culture. We sell our souls" Alia replied, "Don't sit there Thinking you have some great secret. We're all a mess, Iraq's a mess, Lebanon's a mess, don' even get me started on Palestine" (p. 190). Alyan gives her skilled arguments to prove the Palestinian's culture which is miserable on the verge of death.

Homelessness

The concept of home in diaspora studies is a question of identity and belonging. Numberless Palestinians, who fled their homeland following the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948, still have been experiencing the infirmity and insecurity in their lives. Palestinians who escaped are living in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and Gaza Strip. The issue of homelessness has a very fearful impact on its individuals in foreign states. Alyan shares her feelings for homeland in her fiction *Salt Houses* as "Where do you go when you cannot go home" (p. 10). Karmi's(2010) comments have a great worth for Palestinians as "Palestinian life is scattered, discontinuous, marked by the artificial and imposed arrangements of interrupted or confined space, by the dislocations and unsynchronized rhythms of disturbed time" (p. 3). Alyan presents the generational exodus of Palestinians by representing the Yacoub's generation as Saud is living in Beirut, Budur in Boston, Abdullah in London, Manar in Manhattan and Linah and Zain in Vermont. Atef's remembering 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. Many times, the family experiencing the issue of homelessness as mentioned in the opening of novel; the family with its head, Hussam, experiences this issue when they fled from Jaffa to Nablus during the Arab-Israel war in 1948, Six-Day War in 1967, Gulf War in 1991 and The Lebanon Civil War of 2006. In this novel, the idea of home stands for a key which understands the diaspora as it routes itself to the identity of the diasporic subjects.

Sense of Belonging

In *Salt Houses* (2017) sense of belonging reveals the pessimistic situation of the characters for their motherland, Palestine. "The homeland is the sun and the

various diasporas are part of an expending constellation of stars formed around it". (Safran, 2007). Alyan shows this pessimistic situation as Hussam cried more than once at a night for his lost home in Jaffa "They took my home, they my lungs. Kill me. Kill me (p. 4). Another example related to this topic is Atef's telling 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" More he tells "A good house. There was a table under the trees. In summer, we'd sit out there for hours" (p. 273). Atef's remembrance of Palestine shows his devotion and strong lovable attachment with it "Here is Palestine. Here are the streets we'd walk in Nablus, the neighborhood we grew up in. here is everything we loved" (p. 271). Alia's remembering the word "Nostalgia is an affliction" (p. 74) also gives the suggestion about the same condition. Almost all the characters show their strong relations with their ancestral land and also have a proud for this although they have to live in different countries without warm welcome. Living in exile made them aliens in the host states and instigates them to fight for their right to get their own identity by getting back their own homeland. Temporary stay was always made them realized.

Self-interested Wars and Palestinian Identity Crisis

The deep analysis of *Salt Houses* (2017) reveals that self-interested wars paid a very crucial role in shaping and reshaping the identity of almost the whole Palestinians inside and outside the border. The main discussion of the writer is not the depiction of the wars but the horrible conditions dreadful surroundings that the refugees endure consequences force banishment from their home towns. Almost all the characters of the novel are found running away from wars to secure themselves from the cold hearted clutches of death and tyranny. As the consequences of the war, when they are forced to leave one state to another state and they are forcibly welcomed by another dreadful war and this situation appears again and again. After the Six-Day War Mustafa suggests to his family, "I think we should leave" (p. 270). During the 2006 Lebanon Civil War Khal to Riham's words is another example of such situation as "People are fighting, bad things are happenings, and people are dying. We cannot do anything" (p. 229). Alyan writes about the result of the dreadful Gulf War "They've burned everything" (p. 170). All the characters of the *Salt Houses* (2017) remain without any definite identity throughout the fiction as Alyan described the self-interested war of 1948 in Palestine caused the crisis of identity of Yacoub's generation for the first time, after the six-day War of 1967, the Gulf War 1990, and Lebanon Civil War 2006 have snatched their true identity

Conclusion

This study demonstrated how the four generations did suffer the homelessness and how did the clash of culture shape and reshape the identity of characters in the novel. She aggressively supported the Palestinian national cause, but she also developed her idea of identity. It revealed the disastrous impacts of diaspora conditions on minorities and exilic communities. The holocaust of 1948 which is known as "Nakba" and ongoing Israeli's attempts to evict the Palestinian

nationals shattered them physically and mentally that created the identity crisis. It brilliantly represented the condition of the contemporary Palestinian diaspora. Furthermore, Alyan's fiction is a narrative proof that validates the story of Palestine, depicting the experiences of border-crossing, moving across countries as displaced, and living in the diaspora as stateless. The novel has been often designated as a bildungsroman or a coming-of-age story. Alyan constructs a new transnational and intercultural identity in the diasporas. This identity has been connected with homeland who were keeping a memory of their culture in exile. They find themselves at a crossroad, in a zigzag maze, unable to find a stable direction. Palestinians' issue of identity has been increasing day by day. United Nations should play its role to return the Palestinians' lost identity. Its active participation should control the killing of countless innocent Palestinians by the hands of Israeli forces and in taking huge steps to solve the issue of Palestinian Arab identity crisis. America should check its role on equal basis instead of favors only Israel. Alyan's novel is a wake-up call for the United Nations especially for the Muslims of entire world.

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