

The Presence of Absence: The House in Palestinian Exilic Writing

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

This article explores representations of the home in Mahmoud Darwish's poem "The House as Casualty" and Hala Alyan's 2017 novel *Salt Houses*. The article builds on the psychoanalytic discourse of home in literary analysis but focuses on the materiality of the house to consider the role of the house in broader struggles of national identity and claims to place. In the case of exilic Palestinian representations of displacement, scholars' reliance on models that focus only on the psychological ramifications of unhoming and/or limit the material world to a metaphor for a person's inner world may diminish the role the built environment plays in politics surrounding Palestine. My approach privileges the role the house plays in retaining memory and cultural practices that constitute the fabric of the nation. Darwish's and Alyan's texts necessarily engage with the deterritorialized nature of Palestinian identity and the psychic trauma of displacement but also fight against erasure by utilizing the materiality of the pre-*al-Nakba* house as the manifestation of displacement and its memory as a claim to place.

FULL TEXT

I have learned and dismantled all the words in order to draw from / them a / single word: *Home*.

Mahmoud Darwish, "I Belong There"

(line 18; emphasis in original)

I. Introduction

The conclusion of Mahmoud Darwish's poem "I Belong There" distills the speaker's relationship with language down to one idea: home. For Darwish, who is often called the voice of Palestine, this obsession with home emerges from the circumstances of his youth, in which he had to flee his own house, but manifests in his relationship with language. This interplay between the material, memory, and language exposes a tension between the terms "house" and "home"; I argue that the Palestinian house, specifically the pre-*al-Nakba*¹ house, is a central feature in establishing notions of home and homeland in contemporary Palestinian exilic writing. Recent representations of lost houses in contemporary Palestinian writing move beyond wistful nostalgia and stake political, even existential, claims in the struggle to preserve Palestine. I explore the materiality of the destroyed or evacuated pre-*al-Nakba* house and the legacy of its household artifacts in Darwish's poem "The House as Casualty" and Hala Alyan's 2017 novel *Salt Houses* to probe the connections between material and imaginative relationships to the house for the individual, family, and nation.

At first glance, Darwish's poem and Alyan's novel might seem an incongruous pairing, but they complement one another on several levels. First, bringing these two works together creates a link from a pre-*al-Nakba* Palestine to the diasporic Palestinian experience and provides a space in which to explore the representation of house and home from the moment of loss to the reverberations of that loss across generations. Darwish writes from the site of destruction and Alyan, as a Palestinian American writer, explores the legacy of loss as it passes from one generation to the next. Second, "The House as Casualty" provides a theoretical framework through which to consider the significance of the materiality of the house as both a factor in forensic claims to place and as instrumental in cultivating Palestinian identity. Alyan's novel offers a dramatization of those ideas and demonstrates how the material loss of a pre-*al-Nakba* house echoes across generations of exiled Palestinians, haunting each subsequent house that the characters inhabit.

My examination of these texts builds on the psychoanalytic discourse of the home in literary analysis but also considers the materiality of the house and the ensuing influence of the house on social life. Relying solely on a psychoanalytic approach risks evacuating many of the political, historical, and cultural implications that are tied to the materiality of the house and its geographical positioning. In the case of exilic Palestinian representations of displacement, my concern is that reliance on models that focus only on the psychological ramifications of unhoming and/or limit the material world to a metaphor for a person's inner world diminish the role the built environment plays in the politics surrounding Palestine. My approach privileges the role of the house in retaining memory and cultural practices that constitute the fabric of the nation.

In their own ways, the novel and the house are foundational to the imagined community of the nation, serving as spaces in which the replication and reiteration of values undergird the building blocks of the nation. Psychoanalysts and phenomenologists—Sigmund Freud and Gaston Bachelard in particular—turn to literary representations of the house to advance their understanding of people's internal lives. For Freud, the house is the space of familiarity, protection, and intimacy, and when those familiar qualities become unfamiliar or strange to its inhabitants the space of the home becomes uncanny. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard employs topoanalysis as a means of mapping the geography of our inner lives through the houses, rooms, and spaces that allow our conscious and unconscious minds to attempt to reach an equilibrium, a process that culminates in a sense of homeliness. Bachelard suggests that "the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme" (15). It is in this vein that I suggest that the house in exile, especially as depicted in *Salt Houses*, functions as a trigger for the perpetual reminder of displacement; it suspends time at the moment of loss.

Homi K. Bhabha builds on these psychoanalytic and phenomenological traditions and explores the home as a sight of unhomeliness, especially for marginalized or formerly colonized populations. He deconstructs the artificial distinction between public and private space and suggests that "[t]he home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart" (141). Bhabha describes the disorienting feeling that emerges from "the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world" as a feeling of unhomeliness (141). While he articulates the unhomely as a "paradigmatic postcolonial experience" (142), his use of psychoanalysis situates his understanding of the unhomely within a particular Western intellectual tradition in which he links "the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (144).

All three of the above articulations use literary examples to suggest that the house is a symbolic representation or stage from which to understand the feelings and experiences of homeliness/unhomeliness of its inhabitants. While I do not disagree with these approaches—and, indeed, I will rely on them throughout this article, especially in thinking about the idea of an inherited first house shaping relationships to homeliness/unhomeliness—there is a danger in depending on them exclusively. The materiality of the house, and its influence on social life as well as the politics of place, may be overshadowed in favor of a focus on individual consciousness.

While *Salt Houses* is a relatively recent novel, important scholarship has already begun to address its representations of home and memory. The work of Wael Salam and Safi Mahfouz is particularly significant; they make the case that "[r]emembering and preserving Palestinian traumatic legacies in literature constitute what might be called 'a literary intifada' (uprising) against the Israeli political, cultural, and historical erasure of the Palestinian collective memory and consciousness" (Salam and Mahfouz 300). Salam decolonizes trauma theory and notes that it "has been questioned for neglecting the historical and political importance of colonialism in understanding the psychological responses of oppressed groups" (Salam 2). This observation makes space for Palestinian trauma to be more appropriately acknowledged within the discourse. Similarly, Farah Aboubakr adds to the ongoing conversation on Palestinian memory and home by suggesting that intergenerational Palestinian postmemories² and stories create a collective identity that transcends space and time. In each of these treatments, home is understood to be preserved through memories, stories, and cultural practices. I add to this discussion by examining how the materiality of the house—both the pre-*al-Nakba* house and the house in exile—shapes the experience of exile and contributes to the

preservation of Palestinian identity and claims to place.

II. The Relationship between House and Home

Even with all of the attendant ideological and political struggles, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is in large part defined through spatial contestations, with the house serving as ground zero for material, symbolic, and existential struggles. The pre-*al-Nakba* house is prominent in Palestinian literary and oral narrative; it provides individual and collective identity, historical grounding, and a site of resistance. These real and fictional origin-homes contribute to Palestinian identity, marking sites of trauma that echo across time and space. There is still uncertainty about the total number of Palestinians who became refugees in 1948 but estimates range between 520,000 and 900,000 (Kadman 8). Very quickly after their departures—departures that many Palestinians did not foresee as permanent—Israel undertook a combination of legislative and military actions to ensure perpetual Palestinian exile. In Darwish's case, he and his family fled north, across the border into Lebanon. Darwish explains his family's particular situation and their attempted return in a 1986 letter to fellow Palestinian poet Samih al-Qasim: "[W]e 'infiltrated' back from Lebanon when my grandfather realized that the journey would be a long one, and that he must get back to the land before it slipped away. When we arrived we found only destruction. We lost the right of residence and rights to the land" (qtd. in Azzam). Implicit in Darwish's note is the relationship between property and rights. He makes clear that without a material claim to place, rights of residence and land ownership vanish. In the wake of *al-Nakba*, displaced Palestinian writers frequently drew on "images of an idealized past" (Parmenter 47), relying on pastoral depictions of the land and the centrality of the family house within the scene of daily life. Their visions were imbued with a nostalgia that formed sentimentalized portraits of a bygone era. These bucolic images "of particular places articulated the attachment they felt for the physical landscape rather than for an abstract political entity" (46). It was not until the following generation (those who were children during *al-Nakba* or were born just after it) that writers infused everyday scenes and the pastoral with the political. From the unhomeliness of exile, Palestinian writers began "developing a strong sense of place by self-consciously reconstructing a Palestine from which they gain surer foundation in the world" (69). The land and pre-*al-Nakba* houses emerged as political symbols with which exiled communities might identify.

To understand the significance of the destruction of the pre-*al-Nakba* house in shaping Palestinian identity, it is necessary to unpack the linguistic relationship between "house" and "home." Rosemary Sayigh writes that in English, "house" and "home" are not interchangeable; "house" denotes a physical structure and "home" communicates a sense of place and social relationships defined by "a group of dwellings, a neighbourhood, or village" (19). This distinction reduces the social implications of the word "house," limiting it to a commodity that can be owned, bought, or sold. In Arabic, Sayigh argues, there is no such distinction; the words *beit* and *dar* "mean both more and less than 'home'." They refer both to a 'house' and to the family that lives in it" (19). In this case, the dwelling (house) is intertwined with social relations. Furthermore, *beit* and *dar* "have almost no implication of enclosure and privacy—whether for the family or the individual—but evoke a contrary sense of sharing a common space with others" (19). In this linguistic and cultural connotation, the house provides a foundation for the community and provides the structure for the broader concept of the homeland or nation. Subsequently, within the context of Palestinian culture, the destruction of a house means much more than the loss of property.

Christopher Harker examines the politics of how property demolition is characterized rhetorically in relation to the ideas of house and home in English and Arabic. He maintains that "when talking and writing about the destruction of Palestinian property, it is usually a case of house demolitions and rarely home demolitions. This slippage perhaps occurs easily when moving from Arabic to English, since the Arabic word *beit* can be translated as both house and home" (12). However, as noted above, there is a wide variance in the implications of "house" destruction versus "home" destruction. Harker explains that he "understand[s] the term house demolitions to mean the destruction of a built form used as/for housing, and the term home demolitions to imply the destruction of a set of material, social and affective relations that constitute home" (324). It is this latter understanding that I suggest Darwish characterizes in "The House as Casualty" and Alyan extends in her depictions of the home in exile.

Douglas Porteous and Sandra Smith frame intentional house destruction as "domicide," which they define as the "deliberate destruction of home against the will of the home dweller" (3). Porteous and Smith provide a nuanced

approach that moves beyond the evident harm that befalls residents rendered homeless through the demolition of a dwelling to explore the damaging effects that are less obvious, like those that involve the destruction of memory. They explain that "memory cannot be utterly expunged while there are rememberers who can pass on stories to future generations, but it can be mortally wounded when these stories cannot be backed up by accessible documents or physical structures on the ground" (198). The presence of the house as a site of forensic evidence is essential for substantiating claims of residency and is, as Darwish suggests, a site of memory.

III. "The House as Casualty"

In 2008, eight months before his death, Darwish published "The House as Casualty" in his final collection, *A River Dies of Thirst*.³ Late in life, Darwish, who lived the majority of his life in exile, reflected on the significance of the Palestinian house. In the poem, Darwish centers the house and decenters its occupants, focusing on the house as a living thing that is central to Palestinian identity. He uses lists that comprise the elements of a house to reinforce its materiality. *Beit*⁴ (pronounced "bayt"), the word for house that Darwish uses in the original Arabic version of the poem, further substantiates this interplay between house and home.

Unspoken in Darwish's opening line of "The House as Casualty" is the privileging of the materiality of the house as it pertains to the object/subject relationship between the house and its occupants. The poem reads: "In one minute the entire life of a house is ended" (Darwish, "The House" line 1). Darwish uses personification to establish the house as a once living thing. This choice centers readers' attention on the life of the house rather than the lives of its inhabitants, inverting traditional representations of the relationship between houses and residents in Palestinian writing and breaking from traditional literary reliance on the house as a psychoanalytic symbol, representation, or metaphor. The poem's second sentence, "The house as casualty is also mass / murder, even if it is empty of its inhabitants" (1–2), emphasizes the magnitude of loss associated with home destruction.

The absence of a specific setting or location in the poem universalizes dispossession so that it might be read across space and time. Despite this broadness, however, Darwish's personal experience with home destruction and his deep connection with Palestine allow readers to situate the poem within the context of the history of Palestinian house destruction. The time period of the poem is more difficult to determine as house destruction has been an ongoing event for Palestinians since 1948. This timelessness in the poem yields the uncomfortable truth that it can be read as simultaneously reflecting historical and current atrocities.

The bulk of Darwish's poem includes lists of the materials, artifacts, and objects that comprise a house. His use of this cataloging style of description in six different lists can best be understood as a Latour litany.⁵ These lists create meaning and networks through material items; they provide a curated archive that memorializes what has been destroyed. For example, in the eighth line—"stone, wood, glass, iron, cement are scattered in broken fragments like living beings"—Darwish pulls together traditional building materials, organizes them as if constructing a house, describes them as being destroyed, and then uses a simile to compare the destruction of construction materials "scattered in broken fragments" with people's lives. The understated political commentary is embedded in the simile's structure, which uses humans as the vehicle for comparison and the materials as the subject. Additionally, readers' comprehension of the simile relies on their recognition of Palestinian lives as scattered and shattered. This structure strengthens the house as the subject under consideration and uses the human experience of displacement as the basis for a comparative understanding of the significance of the loss of the house. It is this attention to the house as a pillar of Palestinian identity that imbues the poem with political importance.

The remainder of the lists also rely on comparisons between the destruction of an object and a human counterpart who has undergone some form of damage. These lists move from impersonal to personal, gradually giving readers a sense of the intimacy of the space of the house. Darwish completes his series of lists with objects that are closely tied to their owners. Items like "toothbrushes, combs, / [and] cosmetics" (15–16) conjure up images of day-to-day use and the personal relationship between the object and the person. Darwish compares these items, when they are scattered, to "family secrets / broadcast aloud in the devastation" (16–17), reinforcing a reciprocal relationship between the destruction of physical objects and the destruction of privacy. In making this connection, Darwish centers some of the essential elements of home: privacy and security. He offers a catalog of what constitutes a house

materially, but his use of similes reveals the extent to which the objects and subjects interact to create the experience of home.

In the poem, Darwish brackets the lists of materials that comprise a house with sentiments that illustrate the interplay of object and subject. In the sixth line, he writes: "In every object there is a being in pain—a memory of fingers, of a smell, an image." Darwish describes an intimate relationship between objects and humans, signaling that there is a trace of memory that lingers in an object even when it is not in use. However, when the house is violated and the object destroyed, the memory of that person is destroyed along with the object. Darwish's privileging of the non-human in the poem emphasizes how the materiality of the house is instrumental in creating a sense of home through familiarity and memory, providing continuity, coherence, and stability. The last line of the poem, "Our things die like us, but they aren't buried with us" (16), provides an aching finality to the separation of things from their human counterparts. This line echoes the opening line of the poem in the way it treats the house as a living thing, but instead of concluding with a union between objects and their humans, readers recognize that the poem is a postmortem reflection on the devastation of a lost home. The final separation between the house and its inhabitants provides a painful reminder of the dislocation between displaced Palestinians and their homes.

As a poem, "The House as Casualty" provides a space for shared identification for exiled Palestinians. Because displaced Palestinians are scattered throughout refugee camps, reside in neighboring countries, or are building lives elsewhere in the world, the idea of an original home creates an imaginary geography of solidarity across these disparate situations. An imagined national community emerges through the symbolic reunification of the family at the site of displacement. This practice of scaling the home from a dwelling for the family to one for the nation is a practice shared across a wide range of anti-colonial movements.⁶ In the case of Palestine, this strategy provides symbolic solidarity for a deterritorialized population in the face of settler colonialism. Palestinian academic Ahmad Sa'di observes that "social scientists have begun locating identity in the inter-subjective realm, where belonging to an imagined community is constantly reproduced and bolstered through invented traditions, commemorations, [and] the construction of national museums" (176). Artistic works such as paintings, songs, and literature, in particular, facilitate this collective Palestinian identity beyond territorial boundaries.

Another way of framing this point is to think about the house in Palestinian cultural memory as a *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory) that consolidates national memory into a site, concrete or imagined, where the past finds enunciation (Nora). Pierre Nora describes the temporal nature of *lieu de mémoire* by suggesting they stop time "to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial" (19). In "The House as Casualty," Darwish complicates the house as a site of memory by memorializing a destroyed home and calling attention to the difficulty of the relationship between home and identity for Palestinians. The pre-*al-Nakba* house often bears the weight of collective memory; memorializing the house arrests time, resulting in a perpetual past moment in which the potential for historical continuity still exists. The memory of the pre-*al-Nakba* house, maintained in stories and material artifacts, combats the unhomeliness of displacement and resists history's totalizing impulse that threatens individual and national claims to place. This stunted temporality subsequently results in generation after generation inheriting a presence of absence. "The House as Casualty" theorizes this loss through the destruction of the house as a site of memory and, therefore, a loss of the claim to residency.

It should come as no surprise that for many exiled Palestinians, the artifacts brought from the homes they fled during *al-Nakba* have become cherished possessions. Edward Said notes that "if you look in every Palestinian household, into the third generation after 1948, you'll find such objects as house keys, letters, titles, deeds, photographs, newspaper clippings, kept to preserve the memory of a period when our existence was relatively whole. ... [It is a strategy] against historical erasure. It is a means of resistance" (Said and Barsamian 182). The list Said generates uncannily echoes the litanies in Darwish's poem. Said underscores the arrested temporality of *al-Nakba* and points to the artifacts as keepers of the memory that testify to a time before that rupture. Simultaneous with this frozen moment in time is a chronological progression evinced by succeeding generations. The result is that each generation of displaced Palestinians after *al-Nakba* inherits trauma that bequeaths an underlying unhomeliness. The very presence of these items, whether real or represented in literature, fights against "historical erasure" by bearing witness

to a time before displacement. Given the change in context within which they are situated, their significance shifts from functional to symbolic (Said and Barsamian 183). Consequently, these items provide personal and national archives that issue a counter-narrative to the transformed landscapes of bulldozed houses and villages. This process of memorialization and witness is mediated through spatial and temporal frames. These memories are preserved, narrated, and curated from spaces of exile that underscore a geographic displacement. The temporal consideration is more nuanced. As mentioned above, *al-Nakba* marks a break in time. Sa'di writes that "[a]l-Nakbah is the violent moment which ... created an unbridgeable break between the past and the present" (186). I argue above that the house is both a literal and symbolic site of rupture temporally and spatially. The invocation of the pre-*al-Nakba* house in cultural representations or through the display of artifacts means that the experience of displacement is instrumental in defining the Palestinian experience even for Palestinians who did not experience the initial displacement firsthand. Unlike postmemory, in which inherited trauma occurs generationally after the traumatic event through the sharing of memory (as in the case of trauma inherited by generations born to survivors of the Holocaust), exiled Palestinians born after 1948 remain within the traumatic event. In other words, *al-Nakba* has not yet concluded and is felt by subsequent generations even though they might not have the direct experience of leaving their house of origin. Ihab Saloul frames this temporal and experiential dimension of *al-Nakba* by explaining that the difference between what was experienced in 1948 and what subsequent generations experience "may become so blurred that the intergenerational continuity of loss of place can in fact be sustained in memory and experience" (12). Saloul's observation explains how day-to-day life, whether in refugee camps or in more permanent housing in exile, communicates the ongoing state of displacement. I argue that the materiality of the items brought with families in exile heightens that transmission of memory. In this way, memory is grounded in the material as much as it is in the symbolic.

When the focus of the transmission of memories of home are approached from a synchronic perspective, it limits understanding to that particular moment in time. However, when a diachronic approach to the inheritance of the trauma of *al-Nakba* is linked to materiality, objects from the home can carry with them the legacy of displacement. A synchronic approach helps situate stories of *al-Nakba* in a particular moment in time—the moment of displacement—as it was experienced across Palestinian communities. While this approach is useful in thinking about the scale of the event in the Palestinian community, it does not account for the inheritance of the experience of displacement. A diachronic approach to thinking about *al-Nakba* stories recognizes the various manifestations of the events of the past in the present day, even if those events are not explicitly tied to *al-Nakba* (Jayyusi). Critics such as Said, Sayigh, and Sa'di note that artifacts from the family home become significant symbols for their owners and for subsequent generations of the existence of their home and the hope of return. For an exiled Palestinian born after *al-Nakba*, the home away from home can be a source of an unsettling unhomeliness, a reminder of the continual presence of absence. Sa'di points out that the house key is particularly significant for Palestinians in exile because it symbolizes "a return to normality, to a life filled with dignity and warmth" and is therefore "a material symbol for the refugees' state of mind" (181). Said comments on the legacy of the key within Palestinian diasporic communities as "a means of resistance" (Said 183). The key, for Said, is a commitment to return even in the face of political, logistical, and historical realities. I argue that it simultaneously acts as a continual reminder of the experience of loss.

IV. Salt Houses

If Darwish's "The House as Casualty" provides a theoretical framework through which to understand the role that the materiality of the house plays in the inheritance of unhomeliness, Alyan's novel *Salt Houses* dramatizes that framework through a multi-generational story of exile and displacement. It is unsurprising that Alyan, a product of the Palestinian diaspora, has called many places "home." Alyan's father, who is Palestinian, and her mother, who is Lebanese, met in Kuwait. Alyan was born in the United States in 1986 but spent time as a child in Kuwait, Lebanon, and the US. In an interview with NPR, she describes this transient experience as a child as one in which she "felt like [she] belonged nowhere" ("I Belonged Nowhere"). Her perspective on home has developed over time, and she now identifies home as something tied to her culture, history, and family: "I belong wherever I am because I'm bringing with me whatever culture, whatever history, whatever love for food, and music, and memory, and photographs, that

have been passed down to me" ("I Belonged Nowhere"). For Alyan, the experience of home-making offers a sense of belonging that exists outside of place, something her characters wrestle with in *Salt Houses*; they rely on an inheritance of culture to provide a foundation for belonging. This exploration of home away from home is one of the key differences between Alyan's novel and Darwish's poem. As a part of the post-*al-Nakba* generation, Alyan furthers the ideas that Darwish explores in "The House as Casualty" by examining how the loss of an original home reverberates through the generational inheritance of displacement.

Salt Houses weaves together themes of materiality, home, memory, and inherited trauma in order to explore the ripple effect of *al-Nakba* for a Palestinian family of relatively high socio-economic standing. Each chapter shifts time, location, and perspective across four generations of the Yacoub family and raises questions about what home looks like materially and conceptually both for their family and for exiled Palestinians who have the means to live outside of refugee and resettlement camps. The novel begins in Jaffa in 1948 and winds its way through the cities of Nablus, Kuwait City, Amman, Beirut, Paris, Boston, and New York before eventually returning to Jaffa in 2014. Throughout the intervening years, each successive generation must navigate a perpetual displacement not as a firsthand experience of a forced relocation but through the shared memories of family members and the material confines of their home away from home. The recurring theme of the presence of absence haunts each house depicted in the novel.

Mohamed Kamel Dorai argues that refugee camps are spaces in which memories of homes are transmitted to subsequent generations, and the re-creation of villages through organization according to family and village relationships frequently occurs. The refugee camp-*cum*-permanent settlement is frequently the setting for Palestinian exilic narratives because it is quite literally the embodiment of the permanence of impermanence. Dorai notes that "return has been impossible in the absence of a homeland, those [refugees] in Lebanon in particular have faced obstacles to settling permanently, and only the elite have been able to take advantage of resettling in a third country, usually in the capitals of the Arab world or Europe or North America" (87).

Alyan's choice to focus on a wealthy Palestinian family is a departure from traditional Palestinian refugee narratives. Consequently, the novel challenges readers to think about unhomeliness and home more broadly than only the experience of refugees in camps. Alyan situates her characters in stable housing situations and, in most cases, in desirable houses. Her choice to depict an affluent family furthers the conversation about the nature of inherited trauma and its ties to material space, moving it beyond the urgency of dire circumstances to help readers consider the everyday nature of the presence of absence on all strata of Palestinian exiles.

In the novel, houses serve as the site at which the trauma from the past clashes with the daily events of the present and shapes the course of the characters' futures. The first chapter of *Salt Houses* introduces Salma, the matriarch of the Yacoub family, and delivers the origin story that provides an anchor for each succeeding chapter. This story is the family's experience of *al-Nakba*. Alyan intertwines those family memories of *al-Nakba* with events in the characters' present-day lives. These moments ensure that significant family memories become indelibly linked to daily life for each subsequent generation. Characters are charged with the responsibility of holding those memories, creating a living archive.

Salt Houses utilizes a matrilineal framework that renders domestic space as a site of memory transfer. At the outset of the novel Salma is poised to read the coffee grounds for her daughter, Alia, who is to be married the following day. Salma approaches reading the grounds, something she has done "hundreds of times," with unease (2). This tradition is something "the elders—Salma's sisters and neighbors and friends—... [have] seen their mothers do[,] ... and their mother's mothers" (Alyan, *Salt Houses* 3). The reading, "as common place as prayer" (3), is different this time because she will foretell her daughter's future. As Salma waits the customary ten minutes before she inspects the grounds, she thinks about her late husband, Hussam, who died three months prior. This interlude of her husband's death uses the present to fuse the past and the future at a normally auspicious moment, marriage. Salma recalls that on his death bed, Hussam cried, "They took my home, they took my lungs" (3). Hussam's words echo Darwish's sentiment in "The House as Casualty" in which he uses metaphor and simile to connect the house with the body, suggesting a symbiotic relationship. The death of the house, in Hussam's mind, contributes to his own death. Reflecting on the moment of her husband's passing, Salma believes Hussam's "illness was tied to the occupation of Jaffa, the city with the peach-

colored house they'd left behind" (Alyan, *Salt Houses* 3). The timing of the delivery of this information foreshadows the perpetuation of the presence of absence.

After fleeing Jaffa in 1948 for Nablus, the coffee set was one of "the first things she'd bought walking through the marketplace in an unfamiliar city" (1). The use of "unfamiliar" not only communicates the newness of the place to Salma and her family but also imbues the moment with a sense of strangeness or *unheimlich*. Unsurprisingly, Salma's first order of business is to start the process of home-making, which she does by trying to reconstruct, in material terms, what has been lost. As she browses in the marketplace, she spots a tray that reminds her "of the one her own mother gave her when she first wed" (1). Her memories turn to her lost house and all the family possessions that were left behind: "the dresses, and walnut furniture and Hussam's books" (1). Buying the coffee set makes perfect sense for Salma as it facilitates the social dynamics so necessary for a sense of home.

Serving coffee is one of the most common expressions of hospitality that cultivates the experience of *beit* among Palestinians. Sayigh observes that in the refugee camps in Lebanon, there was an immediate attempt to reproduce the social networks that were present in refugees' home villages. She suggests that "the 'beit' has always been a social and cultural necessity even as the refugees mourned their loss of homes in Palestine, and vowed to return to them" (Sayigh 30). Said also describes how these cultural rituals become significant in the way they unite the present upon past practices:

For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension, especially if the exile is conscious of the other contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgement and elevate appreciative sympathy. There is also a particular sense of achievement in acting as if one were at home wherever one happens to be.

(186)

This contrapuntal dimension represents a framework in which the present is always an attempted replication of a particular past before displacement. While Said provides a sentimentalized spin in terms of the reconstruction of home "wherever one happens to be," his use of the term "acting" reveals a warning that these practices amount to simulating home. He suggests that the re-created home "remains risky":

Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure. ... Perhaps this is another way of saying that a life of exile moves according to a different calendar, and is less seasonal and settled than life at home. Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew.

(186)

Said describes the experience of unhomeliness as it emerges from the split between house and home. The impermanence of the exile's dwellings undercut many of the core conditions that produce the experience of home. At its outset, *Salt Houses* addresses the concerns Said raises and dramatizes a contrapuntal moment. For Salma and the Yacoub family, trying to recreate home through the replacement of what has been lost leads to a haunting, perpetual reminder that the house in Nablus is merely an attempted reproduction of their lost house in Jaffa.

The coffee set, an everyday item, reiterates this reminder of displacement with each use. This iterative practice of reproduction of what has been lost is significant within the context of Palestinian exile. For generations born after 1948, the framework for what it means to be Palestinian is shaped by the iterability and ubiquity of the displacement narrative (Jayyusi 112). Seyla Benhabib explains that iterability operates through "the process of repeating a term or a concept, we never simply produce a replica of the first intended usage or its original meaning: rather, every repetition is a form of variation. Every iteration transforms meaning, adds to it, enriches it in ever so subtle ways" (21). Iteration differs from Said's contrapuntal experience in that it is not simply the presence of multiple temporalities that are overlaid. Iteration also contains slight differences from the original with each attempted replication. Consequently, there is a gradual move away from an original meaning or intent, and each repetition produces something slightly different. For example, as *al-Nakba* stories continue to be told, they frequently shift from depicting individual traumatic events to carrying the signification of greater Palestinian displacement. Lena Jayyusi notes that this move

from the private to the public "shifts the sense of loss from the level of personal grief to that of collective trauma" (111). I argue that when iteration is applied to the use of everyday material objects, like Salma's coffee set, traces and reminders of displacement emerge through successive reproductions. Similar to the way that oral narratives operate through the iterative process, associations with a material item also develop through time with the transmission of the significance getting passed to succeeding generations. For Salma, the purchase of the tray and the coffee set is an attempt to reconstruct the sense of homeliness that she felt in Jaffa, but each subsequent use of it communicates, however subtly, a defamiliarization of the familiar. In other words, the coffee cup not only iterates (says or performs) its function as a coffee cup, but the coffee cup's materiality fuses memory and loss and makes them iterable (capable of being repeated). This process is on display when Salma reads the coffee grounds for her daughter. The coffee set is a trigger of the uncanny, reflecting and producing an unsettled space.

It is a foregone conclusion, then, that Salma will see something troubling in Alia's future even before the cup is lifted to expose the grounds, because readers already know the family *al-Nakba* story and come to understand the cup is a replication of what has been lost. Indeed, Salma sees what the coffee cups themselves already revealed, "an unsettled life" (Alyan, *Salt Houses* 9). Salma observes "the dregs forming a rectangular structure with a roof, drooping, an edifice mid-crumble. ... Houses that will be lost" (9). There is an inevitability to Alia's future as it is guided by an inheritance of loss that stems from the Yacoub family's displacement. This moment signifies the broader Palestinian narrative of exile, establishing *al-Nakba* as an ongoing event for Palestinians as it is passed from one generation to the next. By using the geography of the house and the objects within it, the novel explores an inescapable presence of loss as the ensuing chapters unfold.

Toward the end of the novel, two important moments transpire that illustrate the relationship between houses, place, and belonging and exemplify how the inheritance of displacement is transferred across generations. As Alia ages, her memory begins to falter and precious moments from her past begin slipping away. Her husband, Atef, feels the responsibility of collecting those memories and commits to telling stories to their grandchildren about the life they lived. As his grandchildren, Zain, Linah, and Manar, gather around him in the family garden, Atef retells the family origin story. He begins by enunciating the spaces that have carried the weight of memory in exile, the house, the garden, and Palestine: "Your grandmother used to live in a house with a garden. In Palestine" (273). Atef situates the experience of Palestine for the fourth-generation exiles in personal, material spaces that draw a direct line of connection between their lives and a memorialized family house in Palestine. As he shares these stories, he flashes back to "all the houses they have lived in, the *ibriks* and rugs and curtains they bought" (273). Atef describes the perpetual process of home-making while in exile through the accumulation of household items. He remembers the "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, her in Amman" (273). Manar pulls Atef out of this sentimental recollection with a realization of her own: "I thought I had more time ... [t]o ask her things" (173). Manar refers to Alia's failing memory, but her observation is also a moment of recognition in that her sense of identity is intimately connected to Alia's experiences and memories. In other words, Manar's connection to any sense of home is through the history and memories handed down by her family. In this moment, Atef is aware that "these children ... will take this moment and make something of it, turn it into their own lives" (174) and the cycle of inheritance will continue.

In the final chapter of *Salt Houses*, Manar—pregnant, unmarried, and living in New York—feels compelled to see Palestine. As a fourth generation Yacoub in exile and about to give birth to the fifth generation, Manar worries that the links to her Palestinian identity are slipping away. She reflects that "the urgency was there was no urgency" (277). Return journeys and pilgrimages to family village sites play a significant role in shaping identity for exiles.

Unsurprisingly, there are a range of responses for Palestinians displaced in 1948 to the prospect of returning to their home villages, their site of loss. Often there are legal barriers that prevent any prospect of return, even for a short visit, but for those who experienced displacement directly and can return, Sa'di chronicles four principal approaches to visits: Return with the wonder of nostalgia to connect to life before 1948; return but with a feeling of alienation as a visitor; return in an attempt to negotiate with the current circumstances of post-*al-Nakba* life; and refuse to return,

which suggests an unbridgeable gap between past and present (190). Manar is the first in her family to return to both the ancestral property in Jaffa and the house in Nablus. Her journey does not fit neatly in Sa'di's paradigm, owing to the fact that the family sites she visits were never her primary residence. However, they hold a special place within the geography of home for her. The sense of dislocation she has experienced as a result of moves from the US to Lebanon and back to the US reveals an underlying inheritance of unhomeliness that has haunted her life.

In Manar's family, Palestine was never a topic spoken out in the open, and instead felt "raw," like "a wound never completely scabbed over" (Alyan, *Salt Houses* 281). Alyan's use of the word "wound" to describe the feelings associated with Palestine links psychic and physical pain and suggests that exile is an ongoing trauma. In the next line, Manar's grandparents are invoked, alluding to the multigenerational experience of pain. This inherited pain is what compels Manar to make the journey, a journey she always imagined as one in which she would "walk onto Palestinian soil, squinting in the sun" (281). Salam and Mahfouz address the complex relationship to Palestine that Manar experiences, explaining that "Alyan shows how Palestine is not merely a lost homeland, but is both an imagined and a real place, which is central to Palestinian nationalism and identity" (306). Manar's return is not rooted in a nostalgia that wishes to turn back the clock to a pre-*al-Nakba* era. Because Manar has never known Palestine as home, she is confronted by the fact that home for her has been her family's memory of Palestine. In this way, she has inherited the trauma of *al-Nakba* without connecting with a particular place. She identifies as Palestinian, and this shapes the way she understands the relationship between home and the world. She experiences this identity as part of an imagined community outside particular spatial dimensions. Palestine operates as an idea but her journey invokes Palestine as a material reality.

All Manar knows is that she is compelled to make this journey with the hope that "the trip would restore in her some faith, a land to which she'd feel unflinching attachment" (Alyan, *Salt Houses* 283). She plans to visit Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Hebron, and the West Bank. As she travels from city to city, Manar realizes that there are "people who have her hair and voice" (282). However, her recognition of belonging is undercut by the awareness that while she is "writing essays about the diaspora" in the US, there are "people over here being Palestinian" (282). Manar not only begins to recognize her privilege but also addresses the importance of place as it pertains to identity. Her family has been cast adrift for four generations and only have a memory of a lost house to connect them with their Palestinian identity. There are repeated moments of attempted re-creation, like her grandmother's life in Amman, but much of what has been passed down to Manar is a lacuna in the place where home should be.

Manar finds herself in Nablus, the place she most associates with her family's roots after hearing stories and seeing pictures of the house where her grandmother, Alia, was married. While "she'd expected to feel kinship," Nablus turned out to be "the biggest disappointment of all" (287). Manar has pieced together an image of Nablus through family memories. She had imagined "an expansive, generous land peppered with olive groves, valleys between yellow hills" (287) but is disappointed with what she finds. Her pastoral expectations are not surprising given the novel's emphasis on the connection between home and land as a symbiotic relationship that contributes to the idea of *beit*. In subverting Manar's romanticized vision, the novel moves away from the work of previous generations of Palestinian writers who, in the years after *al-Nakba*, described sentimentalized relationships with the land.

Manar's quest in Nablus is to find her great-grandmother's house, and the novel establishes this return with the expectation that Manar might finally feel rooted, essential. All the houses that the Yacoub family have lived in outside of Palestine have failed to deliver an experience of homeliness for the family, and the novel suggests that in returning to the family home in Nablus Manar might finally feel connected. After receiving assistance in the market to find the house, she sees "the pitched roof from the photographs, a hedge of jasmine bushes" and recognizes it as the house she has seen in pictures and heard about in family stories (288). She stands looking at the house, holding up a picture that shows her grandparents, Alia and Atef, along with Mustafa, her great-uncle who was killed in 1967. This temporal juxtaposition between the photo and the present-day house situates Manar as a conduit between the past and present. She reconciles her family's memories, passed down from generation to generation, with the material manifestation of home that is in front of her. She desperately wants to feel something, "some internal tectonic shift" but no such feelings emerge (288).

Following her disappointing experience in Nablus, Manar decides to visit Jaffa, the site of the original family house and land. Immediately, the "shabby but enchanting" town "has a pacifying effect on her" (288). After spending a night out with NGO workers with whom she initially identifies through a perceived shared internationalism, she finds herself on the beach as the sun rises. She reads through family letters she brought with her and pauses on the line "Our mutiny is our remembering" (294). Throughout the novel, the various houses that the Yacoub family inhabit provide the space to undertake daily rituals that enact memory as a weapon against historical erasure. Manar's return is a homecoming not just for her, but for her entire (past and future) family. When she looks up from the letter, she is struck by the beauty of the water and the rising sun. She decides to write the names of her family in the sand as a "testimony" (295). On the beach she constructs a family tree, tracing the roots all the way back to her great-grandmother who once called Jaffa home. When she completes the genealogy of her family, she pauses and reflects, "We were all here" (296), including the child she is carrying, the next generation of the Yacoub family. Yousef Awad remarks that this moment "epitomizes a spirit of defiance and resistance. By drawing her family tree on Jaffa's beach, Manar is asserting her family's right of belonging to Jaffa" (41). This multi-temporal moment creates an unbroken link from the horrors of displacement in *al-Nakba* to a future orientation that suggests that memories of the family *beit* will persist. However, just before she leaves the beach, "[a] large wave washes over the sand, the water eating her words, her family come and gone in this sea that belongs to none of them" (Alyan, *Salt Houses* 296). This ambiguous moment puts into uncertainty the relationship between identity, home, and place for exiled Palestinians. If coming back to the city where the Yacoub family home once stood provides the catalyst for generational connection, then the sea washing over the family tree is a signal of the impermanence of connection between the family and the materiality of place. On one level the novel offers a space for finding shared experience through displacement and the inheritance of loss, but on another level, it reminds readers that this is not a happy ending. There is no permanent return for the Yacoub family at the site of their pre-*al Nakba* home. The novel suggests that while those in exile actively preserve their Palestinian identity and history, the loss of place still haunts generation after generation. As Darwish concludes in his poem, "Our things die like us, but they aren't buried with us" ("The House" 16), This separation between people and the materiality of home remains central to Palestinian identity, and the risk of letting go of the specificity of place is the deterritorialization of belonging.

V. Conclusion

Over the course of his career, Darwish widened his perspective to see his exile in a broader scope. In an interview with Helit Yeshurun, he explains that "in the end we are all exiles. The occupier and myself—both of us suffer from exile. He is an exile in me and I am the victim of his exile. All of us on this beautiful planet Earth, we are all neighbors, we are all exiles, we are all walking in the same human fate, and what unites us is the need to tell the story of this exile" (50). This emerging planetary consciousness, both in Darwish's thinking and in *Salt Houses*, probes the ways that home, in the broader understanding contained within the Arabic *beit*, is being reimagined in contemporary Palestinian literary representations of exile. The conclusion of *Salt Houses* asks readers to consider the complicated relationship between home, family, and place outside of nostalgic visions of return as a restoration of the past.

Both Darwish's and Alyan's texts further the discourse on the house in Palestinian literature. Their works function more broadly than personal or family stories and resonate on a communal, even national, level. The geography of home has become an embedded part of post-*al-Nakba* life for Palestinian exiles, and the evolution of the representations of the house speaks to an ongoing negotiation between house, home, and place. These memories, when gathered, constitute an imaginary map of houses, villages, and the nation and offer a counter-cartography to hegemonic representations, thereby resisting the ongoing process of erasure. These works center the materiality of the house outside of romanticized, nostalgic visions of an idyllic time. Consequently, these representations challenge readers to consider the implications of the separation of the materiality of the house from its inhabitants and how that split might contribute to a presence of absence that creates the conditions of unhomeliness for Palestinians in exile. By focusing on the details of specific houses and objects, these works make a claim for memory and political identity as existing in forms other than the abstract. As Anne-Marie Fortier notes, the utilization of these artifacts works as a kind of synecdoche: "The details of small items, the feelings of familiarity and intimacy with places, people, and

objects, is what, in the final analysis, give concrete meaning, at the individual level, to abstractions like national identity and nationalism" (qtd. in Sa'di 192). These texts necessarily engage with the deterritorialized nature of Palestinian identity and the psychic trauma of displacement, but they also fight against erasure by using the materiality of the pre-*al-Nakba* house as the manifestation of displacement and its memory as a claim to place. By focusing on the significance of the materiality of the house, "The House as Casualty" and *Salt Houses* shift readers' attention from personal trauma to address how domicide contributes to the multi-generational breakup of *beit* as well as the ways the destruction of Palestinian homes undercuts legal claims to place.

Notes

1. *Al-Nakba*, roughly translated as "The Catastrophe," marks the 1948 events that led to Palestinian displacement from their homeland and recognizes that ongoing exile. *Al-Nakba* has become a core element of Palestinian identity, and the anniversary of that year continues to be observed.
2. "Postmemory" is a term used by Hirsch to describe how those who are one generation removed from a traumatic event come to understand the trauma through stories and memories of those with firsthand experience.
3. The original version of the collection, published in Arabic, was titled *The Trace of the Butterfly*.
4. Information about the original Arabic was provided to me by the translator of the poem, Catherine Cobham.
5. A Latour litany, named for a particular stylistic element in the writing of Bruno Latour, is a collection or list that challenges readers to understand the individual meaning of items on the list as well as meaning as it is constructed through the relationships of the items on the list.
6. See Chatterjee and Chakrabarty for further discussion of the relationship between the family and the nation in anti-colonial movements.

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