CSCanada
Studies in Literature and Language
Vol. 10, No. 2, 2015, pp. 1-10
DOI: 10.3968/5959

ISSN 1923-1555[Print]
ISSN 1923-1563[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

Displacement, Belonging and Identity in Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile*

Yousef Awad[a],*

[a]Department of English Language and Literature, University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan.
*Corresponding author.

Received 20 November 2014; accepted 14 January 2015
Published online 26 February 2015

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore how home – as a concept and a physical space—is depicted in Arab American Susan Muaddi Darraj's novel *The Inheritance of Exile* (2007). I argue that the novel, set in the American city of Philadelphia, depicts the concept home as a site of contesting and conflicting ideas as issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class and generational differences among other dynamics intersect with attempts by different characters to define and re-define home. At the same time, the physical space of home becomes a site where these ideas are expressed and heatedly debated. As the characters unfold their stories, home becomes a character in the space of their narratives. By depicting various episodes from the lives of immigrant Palestinian women and their American (ized) daughters, the concept of home emerges as complex, multilayered and elusive. As characters trade homes, move into new neighborhoods and think they have left behind a legacy of exile, displacement, marginalization and exclusion still tint their daily experiences. For instance, Hanan, the daughter of a second generation Arab American man and an immigrant Palestinian woman, discovers the futility of her incessant attempts to assert her Americanness by staking a claim on the city in which she was born and raised up. Although she marries an American man of Irish descent and lives with him in a town house which she prefers to her parents' row house, people around her, including her in-laws, insist on calling her "ethnic". In short, Hanan realizes that exile is an inevitable and inescapable fate as Edward Said reminds us in his essay "Reflections on Exile". True to the title of the novel, the narratives the characters recount affirm that home is an oxymoron that encapsulates experiences and memories of rootedness, dispersal, fulfillment and anguish.

Key words: Arab American; Exile; Home; Palestinian diaspora; Susan Muaddi Darraj

Awad, Y. (2015). Displacement, Belonging and Identity in Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile*. *Studies in Literature and Language, 10*(2), 1-10. Available from: http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/5959
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/5959

INTRODUCTION

In his frequently quoted essay "Reflections on Exile", Edward Said declares that "[e]xile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure" (2012, p.186). Said, whose autobiography, *Out of Place*, chronicles the life of a displaced Palestinian who found a home in his probing investigation of literary and cultural productions, maintains that "a life of exile moves according to different calendar, and is less seasonal and settled than life at home" (Ibid., p.186). Born in Jerusalem, raised up in Cairo, educated in the US, Edward Said is par excellence an exiled intellectual whose writings have an enduring and profound influence on many writers and critics worldwide. As an Arab and a citizen of the US, Said's comments on exile have become a legacy on which Arab authors often draw. Exile, as Said's words succinctly suggest, is an everlasting and never ending process, an inheritance passed down from one generation to another. In short, it is a modus vivendi.

Said's sense of displacement and unhomeliness contributes to building up his identity as a Palestinian in diaspora. Said's story is of paramount significance to other writers and intellectuals of Palestinian origin whose representations of a nation's dispersal have taken

Copyright © Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture

different artistic forms: poetry, fiction, autobiographies, music, films, songs and paintings. Arab American Susan Muaddi Darraj's novel *The Inheritance of Exile* (2007) is one of these texts that attempt to represent and examine how exile has long-term ramifications on the offspring of immigrants and exiles. As heralded in the title of the novel, exile is the novel's subject matter; it is its latent and manifest content. Not only is exile the central theme of the novel, but also it is viewed as a perpetual process that never ends and whose impacts are ongoing. Moreover, through a web of intricate narratives, Muaddi Darraj's novel focuses on the lives of exiled women and their daughters, further reinforcing the continual and the relentless nature of exile. Exile, in other words, is woven into the novel's fabric. For the Arab American characters whose experiences and memories the novel explores, exile gets under their skins, shaping their identities by reminding them of the past trauma(s), outlining their present experiences and drafting their prospective plans.

1. INTRICATE NARRATIVES

In *The Inheritance of Exile*, Muaddi Darraj, the daughter of immigrant Palestinian parents, explores the lives of four Arab American young women by dedicating a part for each of them. The stories of Nadia, Aliyah, Hanan and Reema move between the present and the past and are inextricably and intricately interwoven with those of their mothers. As Pauline Homsi Vinson aptly puts it in her review of Muaddi Darraj's debut novel, the four young women's "coming-of-age narratives are entwined with their attempts to negotiate between their lives in America and their parents' sense of loss and exile from their native Palestine" (2007/2008, p.45). In other words, while the stories of the four young women are set mainly in the present and depict their daily experiences in the US, the stories of their mothers are set in the past and focus on their memories of their lives in Palestine and their immigration and settlement experiences in the US. Nadia, who holds a degree in business administration, seems to have a brilliant future at the company she works at. She survives a car accident but not without a major injury. Her mother, a native of Jerusalem, arrived in the US in the sixties and lived with her husband in a row house in the Italian neighborhood in South Philadelphia. As her husband dies in a car accident, she takes the responsibility of bringing up her only daughter, generating income from the embroidery she skillfully produces. Aliyah, on the other hand, is a creative writer whose stories are based on her family's history. Her father is dismayed with her because she has publicized her family's stories. Aliyah's mother, Lamis, immigrated to the US in the sixties along with her parents, finished her education and got married.

The third young woman who narrates her stories is Hanan. In fact, Hanan's story is by far the most developed one. As a young girl, Hanan does not feel comfortable about her name, the house she lives in nor her family's lifestyle. As a grown up, she gets pregnant outside wedlock, infuriating her mother who strongly disagrees with her daughter's American (ized) manner of living. Hanan's short-lived marriage to her boyfriend John Martin, an ambitious junior sociologist, crumples before she even gives birth to her son, Michael. Layla, Hanan's mother, grew up in a Palestinian refugee camp. In the sixties, she gets married to Michel, a second generation Arab American born and raised in Philadelphia, and moves to live with him in the US. The relationship between Hanan and her mother is fraught with tension, discomfort and discord. The reader is instinctively drawn to contrast this relationship with that of Hanan's friend Reema and her mother, Huda. Reema, the daughter of Muslim Palestinians who immigrated to the US in the sixties after living at refugee camps in Palestine, is pursuing her higher studies as a sociologist. As part of her research, she interviews her mother and records her story of growing up as a refugee. Reema's mother recounts to her many stories about the circumstances and conditions that brought her to the US.

2. ARAB EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT IN THE US

As the above outline shows, the novel, which traverses the past and the present as the characters relate their daily experiences and unveil their memories, is set in the US city of Philadelphia. The subtitle of the novel, "Stories from South Philly", underscores the fact that the city or at least its southern neighborhood, plays an integral part in the development of the narratives that unfold during the course of narration. As Ayumi Takenaka and Mary Johnson Osirim reveal in their recent book on the city's immigrant communities, Philadelphia has "served as a major port of entry and destination for immigrants throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (2010, p.1). Before the liberalization of immigration laws in the sixties, Philadelphia attracted immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe (Ibid., p.1). Subsequent waves of immigrants from Latin America and Asia have "contributed to urban renewal and the transformation of Philadelphia from a largely Black-White venue to a more multicultural city" (Ibid., p.19). Traditionally, immigrants "tended to concentrate in South Philadelphia, Elmwood, the Far Northeast, and Olney, but a growing number of them have also settled in higher-income neighborhoods in Center City" (Ibid., p.12). The city of Philadelphia, thus, is a multicultural space which "immigrant communities have shaped, and have been shaped by" (Ibid., p.16).

Seen from this perspective, Philadelphia, then, is a city of immigrants whose recollections of childhood,

Copyright © Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture

displacement and dispersal are a reservoir for interminable narratives. It is unsurprising then that in *The Inheritance of Exile* home, as a concept and a physical space, becomes a key element that influences the way characters perceive their identities in the US. In other words, in the novel, home is both an esoteric and contested idea and a site of contesting and conflicting ideas with different characters having different responses, hopes and relations to it. Put differently, home, both literally and metaphorically, occupies a central space in the narratives that unfold during the course of the book. Significantly, defining home is inherent to the themes that the novel explores like, to use Steven Salaita's words on Arab American literature, "variegated cultural conflicts and their heterogeneous aftermaths; [. . .] assimilation and acculturation; [. . .] analysis of what it means to be "American"; [and . . .] the difficulties and sometimes joys of intercultural marriage" (2011, p.73). In other words, in Muaddi Darraj's novel, home is not only a concept that characters define and re-define as they continually formulate and even improvise their self-constructed identities, but also it is a physical space that these characters occupy, pace around/about and dis/like. In this context, the way a character perceives the physical space in which they live speaks volumes about how this character prefers to define their identities.

In fact, Muaddi Darraj's novel should be positioned within a broader matrix of Arab American literary and cultural productions, which in turn may be located within the precarious position Arabs occupy within discourses on race and ethnicity in the US. Officially classified as White/ Caucasian, Arab Americans' lived experiences are fraught with issues of racism and marginalization.[1] Paradoxically, Arab Americans, to quote Salaita once more, "have been classified and treated as both 'white' and 'ethnic'" (2007, p.23). In other words, Arab Americans "have never been privy to a fixed legal identity" in history in the US, nor have they been assigned "a trenchant position within American racial hierarchies" in popular conversations about immigration and civil rights (Ibid., p.22). While Arab Americans have been experiencing racial prejudice since their arrival on the US shores more than one hundred years ago, their tenuous position within the nation's hierarchal structures has become glaringly apparent since 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror. In addition, to the old and widespread stereotypes about Arabs, the image of the Arab as terrorist began to gain more momentum in US popular representations since 9/11. Associated with this image is that of the oppressed and voiceless Arab woman.

As Lisa Suhair Majaj points out, the representation of Arab men in US popular culture as "inherently patriarchal and oppressive" and of Arab women as "either exotic or oppressed" positions "Arab culture as inferior to western culture and therefore [. . .] perpetuat[es] colonial relationships between east and west, Arab and American/European" (2008, para. 22 of 46). According to Majaj, this situation has created "a double bind for Arab-American feminists" who, on the one hand, "must struggle against the notion that they need 'liberating' from their own culture," and on the other hand, attempt "to suppress their feminism in order to claim a sense of home in their Arab communities and avoid the charge of community betrayal" (Ibid., para.22 of 46). Nevertheless, Arab American women writers, Majaj maintains, "have continued to expand their exploration of the conjunctions of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and politics" (Ibid., para.30 of 46).[2] In Muaddi Darraj's novel, Arab American women of diverse socio-economic backgrounds, dissimilar religious affiliations and varied generations tell their stories, unburden their worries and reflect on their experiences of immigration and settlement in the US, revealing eventually the heterogeneity of Arab experiences in the US. As these women recount their narratives, they reveal the complexity of defining home as this definition intersects with a host of interconnected issues of class, religion, political affiliation, generation and varying immigration and settlement experiences in the US.

Early Arab immigrants to the US, according to historian Alixa Naff, were Christians from Mount Lebanon, then under the Ottoman occupation and part of Greater Syria (1994, p.29). They came to the US mostly as "sojourners, not immigrants [. . . .] intending to return home one day" (Majaj, para. 2 of 46). By World War I, official statistics show that there were around 100,000 Arabic-speaking immigrants (Naff, 1994, p.24). As Michael W. Suleiman puts it, Arab immigrants from 1870 to World War I, thought of themselves "as in, but not part of, U.S." society and body politic (1994, p.38). As Congress passed a series of restrictive immigration laws culminating in the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 which restricted Syrian immigration under the quota system to 100 people annually, early Arab immigrants were cut off from their homelands, a fact that accelerated the Americanization process (Naff, 1994, pp.26-31). The sixties can be seen as a turning point in the formation of Arab American identity. On the one hand, new waves of Arab immigrants arrived in the US due to the liberalization of US immigration laws. On the other hand, Arab regimes' defeat in the 1967 war resulted in the awakening of the third generation of early Arab immigrants who adopted an Arab identity instead of a Syrian one. As a consequence, both the new arrivals and the third generation began to work for their ethnic communities and the political and social causes of their people in the Arab countries. Members of the second

[1] For a discussion of the historical processes that led American authorities to classify Arabs as White/ Caucasian after a series of legal challenges in the early twentieth century, see Gualtieri, S. (2009). See also Kayyali, R. A. (2006).

[2] For a comprehensive discussion of Arab and Arab American feminisms, see Abdulhadi, R., Alsultany, E., & Naber, N. (2011).

Copyright © Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture

Arab immigrant wave were a mixture of educated Muslim and Christian Arabs and were highly skilled. They also carried with them the sense of a pan-Arab national identity foregrounding political and cultural commonalities among Arabs. Many of them were Palestinian refugees and intellectuals seeking the freedom of expression denied at home. As Salaita explains, the Arab American community today "is a polyglot comprising both fifth-generation Americans and newly arrived immigrants" (2011, p.10). Arab Americans, Randa A. Kayyali argues, can be divided along three main lines: "the broad pan-Arab affiliation, Muslim and Christian identities, and the differentiations between new immigrants and the older generation of Arab Americans" (2006, p.104).

3. WHERE IS HOME?

The Inheritance of Exile, for instance, depicts the experiences of socially-assorted Palestinian families who arrived on the US shores in the sixties and who carry a wide range of notions about home. As the characters settle in Philadelphia, they respond to the new realities they encounter. In the novel, South Philadelphia is explored as "an additional character" as the immigrant Arab women and their daughters adapt to the "urban environment" that they take as their new home (Salaita, 2011, p.73). Early in the novel, Siham, whose husband, Nader, immigrated to the US a few years before her, muses on her early memories in Philadelphia:

> Sometimes, the Italian Market reminded her of the Old City quarter of Jerusalem, full of men yelling out the prices of vegetables and women peddling their crafts, their embroidered pillowcases and blouses. They even targeted tourists with photo frames and wall hangings that said in embroidered English, "God Bless Our Home" or "Home Is Where the Heart Is".

The Italian Market in South Philadelphia, where Siham, has just landed, reminds her of the Old City quarter of Jerusalem. The image she conjures up blends the two cities together and shows how the concept of home is continually shifting and changing. As she trades homes and moves to the US to live with her husband, Siham's perception of herself and home gradually changes as she spares no "effort to be infinitely more American" (p.24).

In fact, Siham's early memories of Philadelphia are linked to the apartment in the row house in which she lived when she first arrived in the US. The floors of the apartment, she recalls, are different from the ones at her parents' home in Jerusalem (pp.15-16). Indeed, the concept of a row house puzzles Siham at first: "When Nader had shown her the front of their building for the first time, she'd been delighted" (p.25). Siham thinks that Nader owns the whole building and cannot hide her admiration that one "'can do well'" in the US (p.25). Siham's reaction upon seeing the new home (both in literal and metaphorical sense) shows the importance of home (as a concept and as a physical space) for her. In addition, that this episode occupies a special space in Siham's memory indicates that this experience has influenced her perception of her identity. In fact, Siham becomes more aware of her identity as a poor immigrant as she walks to Chestnut Street in the more-refined part of the city: "1012 Chestnut was nothing like their tiny apartment above the flower shop [. . . .] She stared up at the windows, awed and suddenly sad" (p.25). The two houses – the row house apartment she lives in and the town house she stares at – are incomparable and this reminds Siham of the two disparate realities of the vibrant city she lives in: displacement and rootedness. As a newcomer and an immigrant to this land, Siham is overwhelmed and intimidated.

As the above episode illustrates, the novel is preoccupied with defining the concept of home, both metaphorically and literally. In other words, home is a concept the definition of which varies according to a character's daily exigencies. Lamis, another immigrant Palestinian woman who hails from a family of Palestinian villagers, finds the row house egalitarian because living in row houses erases most of the differences between her and Siham, who hails from a bourgeois Palestinian family (p.57). Drawing on "homely" pictures, Lamis, concludes that "in America, our water comes in from the same pipe and our sewage exits from the same pipe – here, we are all the same" (p.58). In fact, Lamis gets infuriated when Nader buys his wife, Siham, a dishwasher because she thinks that this ruptures their sisterhood. "Perhaps," Lamis muses, "I would tell her she had forgotten where we all came from, had forgotten that we had landed with one bag each and an endless supply of miserable memories. And that our common bond was our only salve" (p.63). Lamis' words underscore her refusal to forget her past and forego her memories of immigration and dislocation. Just like Siham, Lamis recollects the physical space in which she grew up in Jerusalem: "our house [. . .] nestled in the stony hills outside of Jerusalem" (p.61).[3] This memory instigates a meditation on her status as an immigrant with a legacy of loss and exile: "But now, in Philadelphia, we shared even the walls with our neighbors" (p.64). Confronting this reality makes Lamis, just like Siham, awed and sad.

The novel, however, does not only depict how immigrant Palestinian women perceive home, it also highlights how the daughters of these immigrant women view home. Lamis' daughter, Aliyah, who visits her relatives in Palestine on a holiday, is aware that the concept of home is both complex and malleable:

> So I wasn't going to the home Baba had been born in. I never

[3] It is quite interesting that Lamis uses the word "nestled" when she describes her family's house in Jerusalem because this is the same word that Hanan uses to describe the house where she and her husband John live in Philadelphia as I explain later.

Copyright © Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture

could return to that because it had been replaced by a walled-in city to which my dark skin and last name denied me access. Even worse, I couldn't gain access to Sidi's and Kareem's world, partly because of my Americanness, my accent, and partly because they didn't really see me as part of their lives. (p.70)

Aliyah's state of in-betweenness prompts her to point out that home is a multifaceted concept which can be a site of the convergence of geopolitics and generational and social differences among other dynamics. Moreover, Aliyah bemoans that her position as half American half Arab alienates her from both cultures. In other words, Aliyah feels that her identity is incongruous. In this context, one observes that the themes of displacement, unhomeliness and alienation which mark Aliyah's description of her visit to Palestine permeate *The Inheritance of Exile* and color the experiences of most characters in the novel. Just like other Arab American writers of the 1980s onwards, Muaddi Darraj "seek[s] to assert an identity and express solidarity" (Al Maleh, 2009, p.433). As Majaj puts it, over a century of writing, "Arab-American authors have moved from a stance of defensiveness to self-assertion, producing literary texts that speak to their own realities and chart a space for their voices" (2008, para.46 of 46).[4] In addition to the traditional themes that emerge from cultural encounters and exchanges, the depiction of the experiences of Palestinians in diaspora represents "[t]he most hot-button topic" in Arab American literature (Majaj, 2008, para. 9 of 46).

A number of Arab American writers have been exploring the experiences of *Palestinian Women in Diaspora*. In addition to Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile*, Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* (2004) and Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008) depict the experiences of women of Palestinian origin who either immigrated to the US or are the descendents of immigrants to the US.[5] The stories that these women narrate focus on the issues that arise from acculturation and assimilation. Significantly, each novel pays great attention to the socio-economic, political and historical circumstances these women have to negotiate both in Palestine and in the US. Overall, these novels contribute to demystifying stereotypical images in US popular culture about Arab women in general and Palestinian women in particular. The novels, to borrow James Clifford's words on how diasporic experiences reinforce and/or loosen gender subordination, depict how Palestinian women in diaspora "are caught between patriarchies, ambiguous pasts, and futures. They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways [. . . .], mediating discrepant worlds" (1994, p.314). Clifford's words are quite illuminating because they help us understand the pressures and anxieties that the main characters in Muaddi Darraj's novel have to live with.

The novel can be seen as a collection of stories of two different generations of Arab American women who immigrated or were born in the US. The events of the novel open up a space for discussing a number of issues that are pertinent to memories of the traumatic experiences of immigration and displacement. In *The Inheritance of Exile*, diaspora, to quote Stuart Hall on diasporic identities, is defined, not by essence or purity, but by "the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity" (1990, p.235). It is a space in which identities "liv[e] with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (Ibid). Building on Hall's thoughts, Sudesh Mishra argues that studying diasporic experiences should account for "the varieties of historical continuity and rupture that exist (a) within and across the different diasporas, (b) within and across their cultural and aesthetic practices, and (c) between a single diaspora and its cultural aesthetic creations" (2006, p.175). Mishra maintains that attention should be paid to "historical principles of differentiation whereby the socioeconomic context in which diasporas come into being is given 'special weight'" (2006, p.174). This approach, Mishra argues, ensures that "one may no longer speak coherently and holistically" of a single diaspora because of "the fractures created within a given ethnonym" (Ibid).

Mishra's words help understand Avtar Brah's "concept of *diaspora space* (as opposed to that of diaspora), which includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" (1996, p.180). Taken in tandem, Mishra and Brah's arguments help explain some of the tensions in Muaddi Darraj's novel, especially the way Hanan perceives her identity. Hanan considers herself and her father as Americans since both of them were born in Philadelphia, while she acquiesces that her mother is an immigrant since she was born and raised up in Palestine. Talking to her father, Hanan complains about her mother's austerity since she refuses to "replace anything [furniture] that still worked or served its purpose" (p.162). Her father explains: "'It's the mentality left over from how she grew up [. . .] From the camps'" (Ibid). This dialogue reveals phenomenal differences between Hanan and her mother because of the socio-economic, political and historical circumstances they have experienced. However, although Hanan perceives herself as American, people around her take her as an Arab. People, for instance, keep on asking her from which region in the Middle East she originally hails, but she adamantly retorts that she is American. As Salaita argues, "Hanan is not disavowing her ethnic background as much as she is drawing a distinction" between her experiences as an Arab American woman and those of women born and raised in the Middle East (2011,

[4] Historically speaking, Ameen Rihani's book *The Book of Khalid* (published in 1911) is considered as the first Arab American book. For an overview of "the three phases" of Arab American writings, see Shakir, E. (1993). See also Ludescher, T. (2006).

[5] For a collection of recent writings on exile and home by Palestinian writers. See Johnson, P., & Shehada, R. (2013).

Copyright © Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture

p.74). In short, Hanan "is [not] willing to trade in her American identity for a Middle Eastern one" (Ibid., p.74).

Hanan's identity and those of her generation are heavily impacted by their mothers' fresh memories of a lost home. The other noteworthy point that the plot of the novel shows is related to memory. Embedded inside the narratives of Nadia, Aliyah, Hanan and Reema are those of their mothers, which by and large focus on their experiences in Palestine and the conditions and circumstances under which they immigrated to the US. For instance, Siham, Nadia's mother relates her stories when she first met her husband, Nader. She remembers how she first met him in Jerusalem when he was looking for a wife to take with him to the US to which he has immigrated a few years earlier. In the US, Siham begins a new life and pays attention to minuscule details that surround her: "By October the leaves on the occasional tree in South Philadelphia began to change colors. The trees in Jerusalem were mostly olive trees and they didn't change colors" (p.23). Memories of both Jerusalem and her early days in Philadelphia dominate Siham's narrative. She also keeps on comparing between two different phases of her life. Siham's life, it appears, is defined along one line: pre-and post-immigration. As an exile, Siham is aware of two habitats, two locales and even two worlds. Said's meditations on exile are helpful here: "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" (2012, p.186).

Siham's vision is contrapuntal. Living in the US enriches her experiences and influences her self-perception. In addition, her memories of her early days in the US serve as the basis for the stories she relates to her daughter, Nadia. In fact, this aspect of diasporic experience crystallizes in the last few pages of the book, whereby Huda narrates her stories to her daughter, Reema, who, in turn, records them to keep her mother's memories alive. The last chapter of the novel is an interview that Reema conducts with her mother since Reema's PhD thesis is on the experiences of immigrant women. In the interview, Huda narrates stories of her childhood in Palestine and the horrible massacres she witnessed as a child by Israeli soldiers. She asks Reema to record these stories and "*to keep safe, or to tell all the people, or to tell your sociology professor*" (p.192, italics in original). Huda's narratives show that the trauma of war and displacement she experienced as a child live with her even after she immigrates to the US. The fire drill alarm in her school in Philadelphia sends her panicking as she imagines herself in "the UNRWA school in the camp" (p.191). When Huda finishes narrating the stories, she reminds her daughter of her responsibility, as a writer, to keep alive these stories: "*Just shape the words I said the way you want - fix them and make them sound good. You are the writer,* habibti*, not me*" (p.196, italics in original).

In fact, Reema's project of keeping alive her mother's memories is not entirely different from Muaddi Darraj's project because it entails re-living the traumatic experiences of war, immigration and displacement lived by Reema's mother and her generation in the form of a postmemory, a term coined by Marianne Hirsch that I find useful in explaining some aspects of this novel:

> Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they "remember" only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. (2001, p.9)

As suggested in the title of the novel, a person inherits exile the way "postmemory defines the familial inheritance and transmission of cultural trauma" (Ibid., pp.9-10). Hirsch asserts that postmemory is "an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma" (p.10). It is, Hirsch maintains, "a question of adopting the traumatic experiences—and thus also the memories —of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one's own life story" (p.10). By writing down the memories of her mother, Reema is inscribing them into her own life story. While Reema's project keeps alive her mother's memories, Muaddi Darraj's novel presents the memories of a generation of displaced Palestinian women, and hence, can be viewed as "a reclaiming of history" (Alshaibi, 2006, p.31). The memories of Reema's mother, and other women, "act as a personal testimony or verbal memorials to events that have shaped history, geography, and modern-day politics" (Ibid., p.31). As these women reflect on their childhood memories, *The Inheritance of Exile* "renders Palestine an omnipresent space that [. . .] highlights the pain that has come with dispossession" (Salaita, 2011, p.76). The novel, in short, gives the reader an opportunity to read and adopt these stories of exile, immigration, diaspora and displacement.

Naturally, un/homeliness lies at the heart of these recollections as the concept of home is continually defined and re-defined by nearly every character in the novel. As Sama Alshaibi beautifully puts it, "When you belong to a people without a home, or a home that you are not allowed to reside in, your home is an idea" (p.45). As the descendant of displaced Palestinian parents, Muaddi Darraj depicts in her novel the complexity of defining home for immigrant Palestinian women and their daughters. Concomitantly, exile, as the title of the novel suggests, is a legacy that is inherited. Between home and exile, narratives of diasporic experiences emerge as sites for articulating shifting identities and malleable human experiences. Through the representation of the experiences of characters, exile surfaces as "terrible to experience"

Copyright © Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture

and "an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" (Said, 2012, p.173). For an exile, to quote Edward Said, "homes are always provisional" (Ibid., p.185). The exile's world is that of displacement and dislocation: non-exiles "belong in their surroundings [. . .] whereas an exile is always out of place" (Ibid., p.180).

4. HANAN'S HOME

The "to belong or not to belong" nexus that Said's words highlight revolves around home as a concept and as a physical space. It is a space defined differently from one generation to another. For instance, in *The Inheritance of Exile*, Layla, Hanan's mother, complains that neither her husband nor her daughter understands her dilemma and her sense of isolation and deprivation. Interestingly enough, Layla points out that her daughter's discomfort originates from her dissatisfaction with the house in which the family lives: "Maybe our modest row house in South Philadelphia, with the used dining room set and the worn, burgundy carpets, will not satisfy her" (p.103). In fact, Layla hits the nail on the head by identifying one of the main reasons of Hanan's disgruntlement and restlessness. It is the house in which Hanan lives, but to which she does not seem to belong to that underlines Hanan's sense of unhomeliness. It is a house dominated by the presence of her mother whose mind, Hanan asserts, draws a "dividing line between Arabs and Americans, who faced off against each other like boxing opponents" (p.87).

For Hanan, Layla represents Arabness. Hanan describes Layla's "brown face" as "a ghost haunting a house" (p.87). In other words, Hanan's troubled relationship with her mother casts a shadow on the way she looks at her parents' house. This unsympathetic outlook turns the physical space of the house she shares with her parents into a contested site between conflicting forces of Arabness (read as exile and displacement and represented by her mother) and Americanness (read as belonging and rootedness which Hanan associates with her father). Following a fracas with her mother, Hanan retreats to her bedroom, where she reflects on her identity: "when she finally felt safe in *her fortified room*, she decided she was not an Arab" (p.81, emphasis added). Hanan feels safe only in her bedroom because this is the only place in the house where she can freely articulate what she deems to her true identity, being a non Arab. Hanan's line of thought invites the reader to infer that Hanan's bedroom is the only spot of non Arabness in an Arab-dominated house. This idea is further enhanced by the image of the pillows in Hanan's bedroom "lined up like soldiers at the front line of a cultural war" (p.81). The pillows are the soldiers that prevent the incursion of Arabness into her bedroom.

It is not surprising then that Hanan avoids staying at her parents' home and prefers, instead, to stay out (p.87). In fact, when she is at her parents' home, the only thing she thinks about is to find a new place to live in: "Should she think about moving out, getting *her own place*? Maybe that was the jumpstart she needed, to become independent; maybe *a small apartment* in University City" (p.88, emphasis added). So, for Hanan, it is just a matter of timing. The decision to leave her parents' house has already been made, but she wants to choose the right moment. Still, leaving her parents' house comes at a cost. Hanan's dilemma is made yet more complex by contrasting her position with that of Palestinian refugees. One day Hanan decides to spend the evening at her parents' house and to watch CNN with her father. Ironically, as the TV screen beams pictures from the Palestinian uprising, her father gets animated:

> "How much longer do they [the Palestinian refugees] have to wait? They are barely holding on to their hopes!" he raged, slamming his fist into the plush armrest of the couch, where it landed without any sound at all. If she did *leave*, she would miss these oddly *distant*, but richly familiar moments with him, with *this house*, even with Mama. (p.97, emphasis added)

The passage juxtaposes two different attitudes towards home: The relentless desire and passion of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes is set against Hanan's plan to leave home. In fact, the reader gets the impression that Hanan is a guest in "this house"; the innuendos of words like "leave" and "distant" highlight the fact that this is not Hanan's home; it is just a house that she happens to be living in for twenty six years.

And leave her parents' house she does. As a provisional arrangement, Hanan lives with her childhood friend, Aliyah, in an apartment before she moves to live with her husband John. Once she gets married and lives with her husband in a new house, Hanan becomes more relaxed and less nervous. The language she uses to describe the new house is lush, full of hope, and is even poetic:

> The house John and I bought was in University City, on 38th Street, nestled behind the University of Pennsylvania campus. It was an older town house that cost much more than we could afford, but John's parents had made the down payment as a wedding gift. Three floors high, it had polished hardwood floors, curved banisters, cathedral-style windows, and a stone balcony overlooking the back of the house. (p.117)

Certainly a rejuvenated Hanan is describing the house, a Hanan who seems to have found a lost paradise. Using a lyrical and lucid language, Hanan seems to have found her true self and hence eloquently expresses her thoughts. The word "nestled", for instance, invokes the image of a bird settling snugly and comfortably in a sheltered position, probably to lay an egg and start a new family. Hanan relishes the new experiences and welcomes them with joy and enthusiasm. Significantly, Hanan explicitly refers to the house as her home, contrasting its grandeur to the ruggedness of her parents' house:

> *Our home*, the one with the dark red front door, had a small backyard with thick green grass that John said I'll love until I

Copyright © Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture

> had to mow it in the summertime. I'd never mown grass before, *but I doubted I'd mind*. It had to be better than sweeping off the cement block that served as the backyard of *my parents' row house* pushing the debris and stepped-on cockroaches into the back alley. I hated that backyard, ever since I was a little kid. (p.117, emphasis added)

The exquisite picture painted in the above quotation illustrates that Hanan loves her new home as much as she hates her parents'. She even has plans for the future: She states that she wants "to stamp every room in the new house with my impression, to mark it for myself" (p.118). Simultaneously, Hanan seems to sever her ties with her old world, especially her mother who represents for Hanan Arabness par excellence:

> Since the wedding, I had felt like we lived on our own island, in our small house in University City, far from South Philly where my friends lived. Where Mama and Baba lived. Mama and I had not spoken or seen each other, except for a few tense telephone calls when I'd tried to check on Baba, who was feeling sick more and more often. (p.119)

In fact, by moving out of South Philly, a traditional magnet for immigrants since the eighteenth century, Hanan wishes to reinforce her self-constructed identity as an American. In this context, Hanan draws on the history of John's parents who "both hailed originally from northeast Philly, part of the entrenched Irish community, but moved to Center City in the early' 70s" (p.125). Hanan even seems to hide her abhorrence of South Philly behind a curtain fashioned by the experiences and attitudes of John's parents: "I know they [John's parents] didn't really like South Philly, maybe because of the immigrant communities that turned street corners into gathering places and where a row home often housed four families" (p.125). In other words, by moving out of South Philly, Hanan wants to emulate the experiences of Irish immigrants whose history of assimilation and incorporation as American citizens, as Caroline R. Nagel and Lynn A. Staeheli argue, "is one of almost complete acceptance in the US, despite their initial marginalization and racialization" (2005, p.487).[6]

But moving out of South Philly, living in a town house rather than a row house and even marrying a middle class American of Irish descent do not eradicate the state of exile Hanan has inherited as an American of Palestinian origin. As Said argues, "[e]xile is not, after all, a matter of choice: you are born into it, or it happens to you" (p.184). In the novel, for instance, John finds it fine for his parents to call Hanan "'ethnic'" (p.125). Even, John's colleague at the university, who is working on a book on how Muslim women in the Middle East enter politics, asks Hanan to read the book for "'*authenticity*'" because she wants an Arab woman's perspective on "'how *real'"* her writing is (p.139, italics in original). When Hanan says that she is not an Arab, that her father was even born in the US, and that her "'mother is actually an immigrant'", John's colleague replies that "'Hanan is a distinctly Arabic name'" (p.139).

Hanan resists attempts by others to be pigeonholed. Asked by two senior colleagues of her husband, "From which region do you [Hanan] hail?", Hanan, in vain, connects her identity to the city itself:

> "From 10th and Tasker," I replied laughing. But neither Farrington nor Keriakis cracked a smile. Farrington looked confused, and John looked like he would collapse.
> "Beg your pardon?"
> "10th and Tasker . . . I was making a joke. I grew up here in Philadelphia."
> "Oh, yes! Of course! But where in the *Middle East* do you come from?" he repeated, as if I had not understood the question. "Lebanon, Egypt?" (pp.140-141, italics in original).

Hanan strongly associates her existence with the city itself. She belongs to the city of Philadelphia. At one point, the omniscient narrator tells us: "Hanan had been born right here, in Philadelphia, in St. Agnes Hospital on Broad Street, and she had lived here all her life, next to Mrs. Carpetti and her four cats" (p.81). Hanan's real home is the city itself. The hospital she was born in and the neighbor whose name significantly sounds Italian is part of Hanan's identity.[7] Comparing herself to Rola, a cousin visiting from Palestine, Hanan "wonder[s] how much she would have in common with Rola, or if she'd have anything in common at all" (p.82). As she continues reflecting on this comparison, the omniscient narrator describes how Hanan "drove in the left lane on I-95, passing over the landscape of the row houses along the gleaming Delaware River, then into the industrial area in the southwestern part of the city, *her city*, *her home and roots*" (p.82, emphasis added).

Hanan, the daughter of a second generation Arab American man views Philadelphia as her home. In spite of some people's attempts to ostracize her by pointing out, for instance, the foreignness of her name, Hanan insists that she is a native of the city. By refusing to be

[6] Nagel and Staeheli's argument in this article is quite helpful in understanding how Hanan perceives her identity as an American citizen. Analyzing a number of narratives by Arab American activists on American citizenship and the position Arabs occupy in this arena, Nagel and Staeheli argue that respondents "complicate the meaning of belonging and its implications for citizenship through their expanded understanding of what it means to be American, even as Arab" (p.492). Similarly, Hanan is asserting her Americanness by drawing on the assimilation and incorporation experiences of her Irish in-laws.

[7] A recent study on the works of Arab American novelists Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby has found out that Arab characters strongly identify with white rather than ethnic characters. To some extent, this is logical, taken into consideration that Arab immigration to the US in the late nineteenth century took place around the same time immigrants from southern Europe, especially Italy and Greece, arrived on the US shores. For a study on how the historical process of Arab immigration and settlement in the US has influenced contemporary representations of Arab characters and their understanding of race and ethnicity. See Awad, Y. (2012).

Copyright © Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture

weaned from the city in which she was born and grew up, Hanan views the city "as a new spatial level where the practice or performance of citizenship unfolds through local affiliations, in contradistinction to a notion of citizenship conceived merely at an abstract level and national scale" (Gilbert & Dikec, 2008, p.254). As Henri Lefebvre reminds us, "The *right to the city* legitimates the refusal to allow oneself to be removed from urban reality by a discriminatory and segregative organization" (1996, p.195, italics in original). For Lefebvre the right to the city "is a claim upon society rather than a simple claim to territorial affiliation" and hence it "is a claim for the recognition of the urban as the (re)producer of social relations of power, and the right to participation in it" (Gilbert & Dikec, 2008, p.254). Lefebvre argues:

> The right to the city, complemented by the right to difference and the right to information, should modify, concretize and make more practical the rights of the citizen as an urban citizen (*citadin*) and user of multiple services. It would affirm, on the one hand, the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in the urban area; it would also cover the right to the use of the center, a privileged place, instead of being dispersed and stuck in ghettos (for workers, immigrants, the "marginal" and even for the "privileged"). (Lefebvre, 1996, p.34)

In fact, the last two sentences in the above quotation explain why Hanan moves out of her parents' house in southern Philadelphia, a traditional hub for immigrants. As a citizen of the city, in Lefebvre's terms, she has the right to refuse to live in a ghetto. As Hanan stakes a claim on the city, she challenges "a cultural, political, and social context that is fraught with tension [. . . and] popular racism" to which Arabs are subjected "on the basis of [their] skin color, dress, name, accent and other characteristics" (Majaj, para. 9 of 46).

CONCLUSION

By portraying various experiences of a number of Arab American women, Muaddi Darraj's novel depicts some of the difficulties exiles and their descendants go through. In fact, *The Inheritance of Exile* presents exile as something that needs to be contemplated and profoundly investigated. In this sense, the novel seems to share Robert Spencer's opinion on exile as a phenomenon that challenges our tendency to think unilaterally:

> Exile betokens an itinerant impatience with the shelter of entrenched doctrines; it subjects insular mentalities to the myriad rejoinders of other outlooks, mind-sets, and experiences, and in so doing it strengthens the bonds of sympathy and solidarity necessary to inaugurate a just, equitable, and to borrow Adorno's terms, contented, peaceful, and borderless homeland. A democratic global community is required to codify this cosmopolitan disposition and surmount the divisions and inequalities that capitalism and imperialism have not ceased to inflict on the ideal human community. (2010, p.392)

Spencer's words, which are extracted from an essay on Said's deployment of the concept of exile, draw our attention to the concept's potential to destabilize us at times simplistic thinking. Spencer points out that "exile entails the practice of dialogue" (Ibid., p.391), a practice that the novel encourages and promotes. By presenting these stories of exile and displacement, Muaddi Darraj lays a foundation for a dialogue in which readers from all the corners of the world can participate. The novel reminds us that because we usually take home as a given. We tend to forget the miseries of those who live in exile. Said reminds us: "We take home and language for granted; they become nature and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy" (p.185). Through depicting stories of exile and traumatic experiences, Muaddi Darraj's novel contributes to keeping alive these stories and incorporating them into our own stories. As the characters unfold their stories during the course of the book, home - as a metaphorical concept and a physical space - presents itself as a reservoir of memories that wait to be unveiled, restored and recounted. The physical space of home, including its furniture, its rooms and even its appliances, is a space in which an identity is formulated, expressed, contested and even repulsed. It is the physical space of home that holds Muaddi Darraj's stories together and renders them structurally and thematically coherent. As Majaj succinctly puts it, "if 'home' is [. . .] only possible in the imagination, it is nonetheless a space with infinite possibilities" that Arab American writers continue to explore (para.46 of 46).

REFERENCES

Abdulhadi, R., Alsultany, E., & Naber, N. (2011). *Arab & Arab American feminisms: Gender, violence, & belonging*. Syracuse. NY: Syracuse UP.

Awad, Y. (2012). *The Arab Atlantic: Resistance, diaspora, and trans-cultural dialogue in the works of Arab British and Arab American women writers*. Saarbrucken: Lambert Academic Publication.

Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*. London & New York: Routledge.

Clifford, J. (1994). Diasporas. *Cultural anthology, 9*(3), 302-338.

Gilbert, L., & Dikec, M. (2008). Right to the city: Politics of citizenship (pp.250-263). In S. Kipfer, R. Milgrom, C. Schmid, & K. Goonewardena (Eds.), *Space, difference, everyday life: Reading henri lefebvre*. New York & London: Routledge.

Gualtieri, S. (2009). *Between Arab and White: Race and ethnicity in the early Syrian American Diaspora*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

Copyright © Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture

Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora (pp.222-237). In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited.

Hirsch, M. (2001). Surviving images: Holocaust photographs and the work of postmemory. *The Yale Journal of Criticism, 14*(1), 5-37.

Homsi Vinson, P. (2007/2008). Arab American coming of age. *Al Jadid*, 13/14 (58/59), 45.

Johnson, P., & Shehadeh, R. (2013). *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian writing on exile and home*. Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press.

Kayyali, R. A. (2006). *The Arab Americans*. Westport, CT, & London: Greenwood Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1996). *Writings on cities*. In E. Kofman & E. Lebas (Trans. & ed.). Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Ludescher, T. (2006). From Nostalgia to critique: An overview of Arab American literature. *MELUS, 31*(4), 93-114.

Majaj, L. S. (2008). Arab-American literature: Origins and developments. *American Studies Journal*, 52. Retrieved from http://www.asjournal.org/archive/52/150.html.

Al Maleh, L. (2009). From romantic mystics to hyphenated ethnic: Arab-American writers negotiating/shifting identities (pp.423-448). In L. Al Maleh (Ed.), *Arab voices in diaspora: Critical perspectives on anglophone Arab literature*. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi.

Mishra, S. (2006). *Diaspora criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

Muaddi Darraj, S. (2007). *The inheritance of exile*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

Naff, A. (1994). The early Arab immigrant experience (pp.23-36). In E. McCarus (Ed.), *The development of Arab-American identity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Nagel, C. C., & Staeheli, L. A. (2005). We're just like the Irish: Narratives of assimilation, belonging and citizenship amongst Arab-American activists. *Citizenship Studies*, *9*(5), 485-498.

Said, E. W. (2012). *Reflections on exile & other literary & cultural essays*. London: Granta.

Salaita, S. (2011). *Modern Arab American fiction: A reader's Guide*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP.

Salaita, S. (2007). *Arab American literary fictions, cultures and politics*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Alshaibi, S. (2006). Memory work in the Palestinian Diaspora. *Frontiers*, *27*(2), 30-53.

Shakir, E. (1993). Coming of age: Arab American literature. *Ethnic Forum: Bulletin of Ethnic Studies and Ethic Bibliography, 13*(2), 63-88.

Spencer, R. (2010). Content homeland peace: The motif of exile in Edward Said (pp.389-413). In A. Iskandar & H. Rustom (Eds.), *Edward Said: A legacy of emancipation and representation*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press.

Suleiman, M. W. (1994). Arab-Americans and the political process (pp.37-60). In McCarus, E. (Ed.), *The development of Arab-American identity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Takenaka, A., & Johnson, O. M. (2010). Philadelphia's immigrant communities in historical perspective (pp.1-22). In Takenaka, A., & Johnson, O. M. (Eds.), *Global Philadelphia: Immigrant communities old and new*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP.

Copyright © Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture