

Memory Archives as Vessels of Post-memory: Examining Intergenerational Trauma and Cultural Resilience in Alyan's Salt Houses

Sehrish Noreen

MPhil in English Literature, UMT, Lahore

Email: sehrishkhalid0099@gmail.com

Rehan Ahmad

Department of English, Division of Arts and Social Sciences

University of Education, Lower Mall Campus, Lahore,

Email: rehan.ahmad@ue.edu.pk

Abstract

This research investigates a reciprocal and dialogical relationship among post-memory, intergenerational trauma, and cultural resilience in Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*. Memory archives such as letters, images, and heirlooms are the vessels of postmemory, serving as resources for preserving cultural identities. Deploying Marianne Hirsch's theorizing in the context of postmemory, the research explores the role of inherited memories in the perpetuation of forced displacement and historical trauma through individual narratives, familial relationships, and cultural artefacts. Alyan's *Salt Houses*, a multigenerational novel, unfolds the historical devastations caused to the individual and cultural identities of Palestinian Diasporas in the aftermath of Nakba, Naksa, and The Gulf War. Drawing its theoretical insights from postmemory, this research investigates the characters' psychological and emotional responses to postmemory manifestations such as flashbacks, cultural preservation, and resistance, emphasising the importance of remembering and narrating the past.

Key Words: Memory Archives, Postmemory, Intergenerational Trauma, Cultural Resilience, Marianne Hirsch

I. Introduction

Hala Alyan, an acclaimed and intellectual Palestinian-American writer, brilliantly accounts the impacts of political turmoil on a Palestinian family as she masterfully charts emotional and psychological landscapes of her characters against the backdrop of 1948 Arab Israeli War, 1967's Six-Day War, and then the 1990-91 Gulf War. Her debut novel, *Salt Houses*, moving among different generations and geographical settings, chronicles the transgenerational plight of Palestinian Diasporas. Since 1993, around 100,000 Palestinians have taken part in a peace process that has left them unsure about the effectiveness and goals of their efforts (Schulz, 3). Personal reminiscences also enrich Alyan's narrative, to supply a tangible sense of those who have lived beneath the shadow of historical displacement. In an interview with Sarah Neilson, Alyan stated, "immigration and memory are really, really fascinating subjects to explore" (Alyan, 2021). The novel stresses postmemory's dynamic role in shaping contemporary realities, with the reconfiguration of cultural and familial memories throughout displacement indicating the characters' resilience and ongoing struggle to reclaim their historical past. Hirsch defines postmemory as the second generation's intimate connection to their parents' trauma and culture, as they indirectly experienced this through their stories, images, and behaviours, which appear to nearly become their own memories (Hirsch, 5). While not identical to experienced memory, postmemory has a similar affective and mental weight, as evidenced by vivid images and fractured narratives passed down through generations. Alyan, meanwhile, illustrates the ways characters imbibe collective trauma as stories, images, and behaviours that are part of their personal story but mostly indirect, like a kind of phantom limb of displacement and loss. To convey the emotional and psychological burden of post-memory, Alyan uses characters like Salma, Alia, and Manar to navigate the living, fractured narratives of their ancestor's wartime traumas to help herself engage with her inherited cultural knowledge under siege.

Intergenerational Trauma was first coined by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart in the 1980s, and she defines it as “the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over a lifetime and further generations” resulting from a history of genocide (Brave Heart, 1980.). Interweaving a multi-generational story, Alyan emphasizes how postmemory itself is an active force within intergenerational trauma, contributing to a continued condition of scattering and sundering. It was a powerful testament to the way the trauma of such events bleeds beyond the generation that experienced them and into future generations, to whom it will never be more than a shadow. Postmemory is the transmission of trauma from one generation to another, such that descendants remember their ancestors’ pain and terror, not through actual lived experience but through cultural practices and narratives that inform their identity and relationships. Alyan portrays characters such as Alia and Souad, whose lives are influenced by their forefathers’ unresolved sadness and fears. The family’s memories, cultural customs, and traditions serve as vital sources of support and continuity despite constant sufferings. Through postmemory, the characters get not just the suffering of their ancestors but also their cultural heritage, which provides them with a resilient source. Memory archives support the maintenance and dissemination of these cultural elements by containing artefacts, oral histories, and rituals. Despite continuous relocation, Alyan’s narrative illustrates the Yaqoub family’s tenacity to maintain their identity and feeling of place. This study examines the catastrophic repercussions of historical events on the personal and collective lives of Palestinians and its manifestations in emotional responses. The research further investigates the dual role of postmemory in transmitting traumatic memories of past and encouraging cultural resilience among the Palestinian diasporas.

I. I. Aim of Research

The research elucidates the role of memory archives as channels for the transmission of cultural identity and intergenerational trauma. It examines how personal and collective narratives, and cultural artefacts do not merely preserve the memories of past, but also play an active role in the transmission of trauma across generations. This study mainly focuses upon the dual role of postmemory, ultimately leading to personal and collective resilience among displaced Palestinians.

I.2. Research Objectives

To scrutinize the function of memory archives in intergenerational transfer of trauma and cultural identity

To examine the psychological effects of postmemory and how do characters deal with them

To investigate how cultural artefacts and personal narratives contribute to cultural continuity and resilience in the face of constant upheaval and displacement.

I.3. Research Questions

What is the role of postmemory in the psychological functioning of those persons who have inherited collective trauma?

How do memory archives impact intergenerational transmission of cultural identity and trauma?

How can personal narratives and cultural artefacts promote cultural resilience and continuity during among Palestinian Diasporas.

2. Review of Literature

Anonymous (2019) noted that Salt Houses "provides necessary perspective on the consequences of the Palestinian diaspora as it grinds away at those who drift from one nation to another." Set in Palestine, the novel focusses on the experiences of three generations of a Palestinian family as they redefine what home is, when conflict leads to creation. It questions whether a refugee can build their new home while their children simply convert their cultures. The book also looks at how constant calamities can test family loyalties. “Alyan's Salt Houses is a family saga, although even the word 'saga' seems too grand since none of its characters are History's makers: They are history’s victims” (Anonymous, 2019). Anonymous reflections on Salt Houses reveal how memory archives work to share the narratives of displacement within the replaced Palestinian generations forcibly removed from their homeland. From the multigenerational experience of a family, the book works as an archive of memories that not only saves a continuous trauma but questions on how we perceive home and our identities through ongoing relocation, thus encapsulating cultural resilience and intergenerational memory.

Jan Assmann in his book *Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis* makes a distinction of collective remembrance as communicative memory and cultural memory (Hirsch, 32). Salt Houses contains the first set of memories, communicative memories, that Jan alludes to in his essay, on top of cultural memory. Most of the memory work that is done in the novel is communicative memory, a situation in which what happens to history is not excavation but transmission. Since those who have experienced events like the Nakba and Naksa tell their personal stories downwards towards future generations. Moreover, while they themselves turn into direct witnesses and are getting overaged, they try to institutionalize these

remembrances in the form of books, archives or rituals/performances for them not to fade into oblivion but remain within the family context and cultural framework.

This is beautifully expressed in a one-line summary of Alyan's story in Claire McAlpine's (2017) review of *Salt Houses*, who describes the novel as a portrayal of hardships and resilience of relocated refugees on an alien land. The piece reminds us, as individuals forced to flee their homes at rankling rates learned all too well, that Palestinians continue to forge bonds to their roots through cultural memories, especially recipes, traditions uninterrupted by the displacement faced by each passing generation. In exile, she reminds us, refugees experience the paradoxical victory of thriving in new homes while still aching for a homeland that is physically absent but spiritually pervasive in their very fiber.

Sajjad Gheytsi discusses how Hala Alyan's novel *Salt Houses* weaves together memory, identity, and resistance in an essay entitled "Echoes of Exile: Rememory and Resistance in *Salt Houses*." The Rememory Study examines how painful pasts are not simply remembered but operate as "living landscapes" that mediate present experiences and future destinies. At its core, this exploration is embedded in the larger story of Palestinian forced evictions and ongoing occupations, emphasizing how cultural and traumatic memories are passed from one generation to another, affirming an endless cycle of resistance and reclamation of identity. In this way, it also highlights the active process of memory in challenging and healing historical traumas, demonstrating generational stories of strength.

Alyan unpacks individual lives within conflict, showing an intimate and universalized moment in conflict (Lemasson). He also commends Alyan for infusing what sounds like an ordinary mother-daughter disagreement over clothing with subtext, serving as a microcosm for a broader historical malaise. Alyan harnesses family dynamics and individual moments as powerful vessels of postmemory. Ordinary conversations between mother and daughter are pregnant with the reverberations of previous traumas and tragedies, displaying how intergenerational trauma shapes their everyday exchanges and personal connections. They introduce family reunions, grief, and visits to ancestral homes as the familiar acts of recollection, storied memory after all proving archivists of collective recall, emphasizing the complex relationship between personal identities and broader historical events in shaping individual and collective realities.

3. Research Gap:

Given the scarcity of scholarship on trauma-related postmemory, this theoretical paper helps to bridge an important lacuna in knowledge about how postmemory contributes to the perpetuation of intergenerational trauma within displaced communities and the installment of cultural resilience. It examines the extent to which cultural artifacts, personal stories, and memory archives are not only commemorative but productive in transmitting psychological and emotional inheritances from historical traumas such as those experienced by Palestinians. What makes this work even more important is that it shows how memories shape identity and cultural preservation; something much less evident in the literature of postmemory and intergenerational trauma.

4. Methodology

The research uses a qualitative textual approach to analyze Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*. Under the literary canon of Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, the study examines the role of memory archives like letters, photographs and heirlooms in passing down the memory of cultural identity and intergenerational trauma. This includes an examination of the novel's narrative structure, a consideration of character development within the novel, and thematic analyses surrounding historical events like the Nakba and Naska to determine how these characteristics play into ideas on intergenerational trauma and cultural resilience. The family saga also focuses on the psychological and emotional dimensions of the characters to trace how those inherited memories affect and work as means of coping with displacement and trauma. The methodology further includes matching these literary discoveries with historical memories and psychological concepts to place the fictional representation in the setting of actual world forces.

5. Memory Archives as Vessels of Postmemory

5.1. Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational trauma refers to the process in which a trauma experienced by one generation is passed on, either consciously or unconsciously, to the next. It usually occurs among communities that have experienced mass trauma because of events such as war and displacement. *Salt Houses* places these themes in the heart of the familial unit, seen through the eyes of characters in the Yacoub family, a displaced diasporic Palestinian line, and explores how memories of loss and dislocation influence both older and younger generations. Central to this transmission is Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, describing the relay of traumatic experiences where descendants inherit memories and feelings as if they had experienced them themselves (Hirsch, 22). The younger Yacoub members who are born in exile tend to be deeply influenced by the inherited memories which have been related to them through their parents and grandparents.

This reflection of postmemory is evident in the children of diasporas for whom this initial displacement was never lived but just inherited from elders' trauma, and hence its effects projected on their subsequent constitutions and identity. "Souad thinks of the map on her wall at home. For the first time, she realizes sharply that it isn't her wall anymore. The House is gone" (Alyan, 160). Elie, a Lebanese boy, wonders that "already the flames and bulldozers are familiar to Souad", while immersing his eyes gravely on the television (Alyan, 155). Diasporas are the people "floated upwards from history, memory, and time" (Rushdie 1983), which means they are disenfranchised while also intimate with a history that defines their past, present and future. Safran (1991) defines diasporic consciousness as a state of mind and identity caused by living beyond one's hometown, which can lead to emotions of alienation and internal struggle, as seen in Alyan's characters, who, despite their indifference, desire passionately for their roots.

Hala Alyan shows the intergenerational effects of trauma on behavior and psyche through the Yaqoub family in Salt Houses. The younger generations, who are at a considerable remove from the traumatizing events of their forbears, nevertheless, demonstrate behaviors and emotional reactions that suggest that they are still dealing with the same things that were never resolved. Manar, Alia's granddaughter, used to defend herself against criticism about her shared upbringing, but "lately has been accepting it, reveling in the notion that her problems, the disarray of her life, all spring from her heritage" (Alyan, 248). This has been demonstrated in psychological research which suggests that the effects of trauma are passed down similarly, via patterns of emotions and behaviors (Yehuda et al., 2001). Characters like Mustafa, Alia's brother, who struggles with his own displacement and detachment that originated from his parents' unhealed wounds. These emotional burdens overwhelm his inherited qualities and stop him from obtaining a stable self-identity and good sense of belonging in this new environment. While being nostalgic about his mother, "all he can see is the peeling paint, the puff of dust when he stomps on the rug... He thinks of how, when his mother lived in the house, the rooms smelled of lavender" (Alyan, 31).

Alyan depicts these conflicts with exquisite empathy, analyzing the widespread and long-lasting character of intergenerational trauma. Alyan's investigation of intergenerational trauma in Salt Houses goes beyond the personal to include broader sociopolitical concerns, emphasizing the impact of geopolitical decisions on Palestinian refugees. She examines the political causes that cause displacement and identity problems, emphasizing the human cost. Alyan's representation of the complexity of intergenerational trauma is thorough, incorporating historical and political circumstances. The Yaqoub family's preservation of cultural memory acts as a kind of resistance to the erasure of their past and identities.

5.2 Cultural Resilience

Memory plays a multifaceted role in preserving cultural identity, negotiating personal trauma, and mobilizing generational continuity. Personal and collective memories are a prism through which cultural histories and traditions shape the identities and experiences of the characters. Aliya's characters find themselves overwhelmed by fond, happy memories which call them back to their roots. In line with the sentiment of Deborah Boehmer (1995), "immigrant characters display a sensitivity towards their origins, referred to by James Clifford (1994) as "an awareness of discrepant attachments" (p. 248).

The novel opens with Salma Yaqoub predicting the future of her family in a proleptic beginning that runs through the whole story. The calmness and tranquility of a Palestine from before 1948 is underscored and juxtaposed with the chaos and displacement of the present, setting up tones which echo across generations. For the Yaqoub family, the memory of their ancestral home is a touchstone, despite all that they have endured in subsequent geographical and emotional dislocations. Each chapter offers a glimpse into what is going on in the lives of different family members and how their memories are weaving into their present reality. Alia, Salma's daughter, displays this complex interaction of then and now, searching for points of belonging in new spaces that are overshadowed by the specters of her memory-home. "She missed her bedroom, the slopping hills of Nablus, the sounds of the men laughing over her burned meals. She couldn't wait for home" (Alyan, 53). In one image, her experiences from her childhood home and the cultural practices she observed there are permeated with a sense of nostalgia and omission. That sentiment of a homeland now so distant, and the desire to keep cultural tradition alive in exile underlies the broader Palestinian struggle and the role that is performed by memory in its continuity.

Alyan's narrative shifts between time periods and perspectives, presenting a mosaic of experiences to manifest how both personal and communal memories are remembered and passed down. It is these memories that keep the Yaqoub family tied to their roots while living life in new places. The mention of *ibrik* and broadcasting of Naska songs on TV is indicative of the penetration of cultural practices into their everyday lives (Alyan, 56-57). In Salt Houses, the memories and traumas bequeathed to younger generations mimic their parents and grandparents. Those memories also pass to the children who carry that familial imprint from birth, shaping their perceptions of themselves and the world around them, creating one long line which establishes the family's cultural DNA through time.

In this way, between the trials of the present, the legacy of memory is passed down through the generations, keeping as much family history, culture and identity alive. As fractured and painful as the Yaqoub family may be, memories are still what they are built on and derive their strength from. Despite their physical dislocation from Palestine, the Yaqoub family preserves the cultural practices and traditions which serve as symbols that reinforce their sense of Palestinian heritage. The family still gets together to celebrate feasts on holidays, cook Palestinian dishes, and pass down stories through generations. The letters from Atef are important in retaining the cultural identity of the Yaqoub family and in maintaining an affinity with their past and origins. These letters function as historical documents that stretch history between past and present generations, providing us with insights into the experiences of family displacement, survival, and resilience. At the end of the novel, Manar's decision to preserve those letters symbolizes the strength and persistence of the Yaqoub family through invasions and wars. "Wherever she goes, she keeps the letters in her purse, wrapped in tissue paper and bound with twine" (Alyan, 250). The Yaqoub family preserves cultural memory through oral histories, rituals, and traditions as a means of resistance to cultural erasure and marginalization.

Modern investigations on trauma and memory have revealed that traumatic memories frequently are fragmented and might emerge randomly triggering responses, influencing behavior, and emotional responses long after the original event (Kolk, 2015). Alyan uses this fractured understanding as the structural foundation of her narrative, showing how memories of trauma and displacement can take root within our brains. This alignment serves to enrich the integrity of the characters' experiences and the overall impact on the novel. *Salt Houses* illuminates the power of memory in both perpetuating past suffering and shaping future experiences, portraying the ongoing legacy of exile while simultaneously documenting the tireless resistance of Palestinian hope.

6. Social Significance

This study has important societal consequences because it investigates the complex ways in which memory archives act as critical links in the maintenance and transmission of cultural identity after displacement. By examining the intergenerational impacts of trauma among Palestinian families as depicted in Alyan's *Salt Houses*, the study emphasizes the importance of memory in bearing the weight of the past while also creating resilience for future generations. The research on postmemory sheds light on the broader societal consequences of historical trauma and suggests strategies for communities to recognize and resolve these deep-seated emotional legacies.

7. Future Recommendations for Research

Further studies on postmemory could occur in additional contexts or cultures to explore how various types of displacement due to war, poverty, or national calamities, impact intergenerational trauma or cultural resilience. The role of digital memory archives can also be explored and the impact of modern technology on cultural heritage transmission can also be explored. Furthermore, applying interdisciplinary frameworks drawing on psychology, history and cultural studies would contribute to our understanding of how memories affect shared identities within diasporic communities.

8. Conclusion

This study examines the intricate interrelationships between postmemory, intergenerational trauma, and cultural resilience, emphasizing the importance of memory archives in conserving and communicating history. Through a careful investigation of Hala Alyan's "*Salt Houses*," the study highlights how personal narratives, letters, photographs, and heirlooms not only preserve cultural identity but also aid in the processing of past traumas throughout generations. The findings emphasize the long-lasting influence of catastrophes such as the Nakba and Naska, indicating the profound marks they left on both individual and collective psyches. This study makes a substantial contribution to our knowledge of how postmemory transmits trauma while also sustaining cultural continuity and survival. It provides a route for long-term cultural resilience in the face of continual displacement and suffering, implying that Marianne Hirsch's theories might be applied to other displaced or traumatized communities around the world.

Works Cited/References

- Alyan, H. (2017). *Salt Houses*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Boston, New York.
- Schulz, H. L. (2005). *The Palestinian Diaspora*. Routledge.
- Lemasson, P. (2018). Book Review for Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*. *The American Library in Paris*.
<https://americanlibraryinparis.org/book-review-salt-houses-hala-alyan/>
- Neilson, S. (2021). *Locating Curiosity and Joy: A Conversation with Hala Alyan*. *The Seventh Wave*.
<https://medium.com/the-dock/locating-curiosity-and-joy-a-conversation-with-hala-alyan-6f666e64e260>
- Hirsch, M. (2012). *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press: New York.
- Safran, W. (1991). *Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myth of Homeland and Return*.
https://www.academia.edu/5029348/Diasporas_in_Modern_Societies_Myths_of_Homeland_and_Return
- Clifford, J. (1994). *Diasporas*. *Cultural Anthropology*.9(3). http://waynadx.com/pdf/Clifford_diaspora.pdf.
- Yellow Horse Brave Heart, M. (1995). *Historical Trauma and Unresolved Grief: Implications for Clinical Research and Practice with American Indians*. *The Journal of the National Center*.
- McAlpine, C. (2017). *A Review of Salt Houses by Hala Alyan*. *The Book Browse Review*.
- Gheytsi, S. (2024). *Echoes of Exile: Rememory and Resistance in Salt Houses*. *Arab Studies Quarterly*.
- Anonymous. (2019). *Book Review: Salt Houses, by Hala Alyan*. <https://weekendspeets.com/2019/01/08/book-review-salt-houses-by-hala-alyan/>
- Rubab, I. (2019). *A Critical Analysis on Identity Crisis in Hala Alyan's Salt Houses*. *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review*.
- Boehmer, E. (1995). *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rushdie, S. (1983). *Shame*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Kolk, B. (2015). *Book Review: The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Books.
- Yehuda et al, R. (2001). *Childhood trauma and risk for PTSD: relationship to intergenerational effects of trauma, parental PTSD, and cortisol excretion*. *Dev. Psychopathology*.