Between Rootedness and Alienation: An Ecological Reading of Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*

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Abstract: The overlapping of the theoretical framework of Ecocriticism and Postcolonialism highlights the interdisciplinarity between the environment and literature and the possibility of using elements of either of them to reflect and overwhelm the other. This overlap becomes a significant case study in depicting Anglophone writers' yearning in the diaspora or at home while writing about their homelands, reflecting their longing to belong while suffering from alienation and up-rootedness. It is worth mentioning that most widely different literary works that blend ecocriticism with postcolonialism concentrate on the idea of devastation or mishandling of nature because of colonialism and other causes. However, this research will attempt to deviate from these critical readings in handling this interdisciplinarity, as it will examine the reflections of the environmental elements with postcolonial concepts of alienation and rootedness on people's feelings and emotions in the diaspora by offering a critical reading for Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses* (2017). The novel reveals the role of natural environmental elements like plants, gardens, and trees in reflecting the characters' senses of rootedness and belonging, while water, seas, and oceans describe their senses of alienation and estrangement. *Salt Houses* draws on how the dispossessed Palestinians' cultivation and regeneration of their gardens and plants drive their struggle, resistance, and existence against the Israeli occupation.

Keywords: alienation, diaspora, interdisciplinarity, rootedness, writing back

1. Introduction

The past centuries are characterized by political upheavals and the sequence of tragedies since 9/11th that have reshaped the world's countenance. Here, the inseparable relationship of history, the past, and the present intertwine with the other significant notions of time, space, and place. Consequently, a fluid relationship between the history of the Western Empires and the geographical spaces of the non-Western world has incentivized Arab intellectuals and writers to re-think and re-experience their histories and places to cope with the world's contemporary events, developments, and prospects. Due to political, social, economic, and cultural reasons, most Arabs suffer from dislocation and roaming between different places over the globe. This suffering has its influences on intensifying their feelings of protest and resistance to accepting and absorbing this diasporic situation. Hence, Anglophone Arab writers employ new strategies in their writings to demonstrate their own peoples' woes and agonies. They tend to break the traditional methods of implication in their literary works by utilizing new elements from their milieu to express their resistance and existence. These writers

are motivated and provoked by their new contexts to explore new themes within different theoretical frameworks that tackle several issues, such as diaspora, cultural hybridity, in-betweenness, rootedness and belonging, alienation and displacement, and more.

For decades, critical readings concerned with the devastation of nature because of colonization have dominated most of the literary works' scope, blending ecocriticism with postcolonial studies. However, the perspectives of the writers in contemporary novels have deviated from this concern by tackling the issues that mingle both theories, but from a different angle. A case study can be examined through the overlap of ecocriticism and postcolonialism through the interdisciplinarity of the environment and literature, as well as the possibility of using either of them to reflect and permeate the other. This overlapping becomes a significant matter in depicting Anglophone Arab writers' yearning and nostalgic sensation while writing about their homelands, either in the diaspora or at home, and reflects their longing to belong while suffering from alienation and uprootedness. Their novels reveal the role of natural elements like plants, trees, gardens, water, seas, and oceans, to name but a few, in describing their characters' senses of either rootedness or alienation.

Between green and blue, the symbolic role of colors is also among the most significant indicators of people's inner thoughts and conflicts and a new strategy of writing to illuminate the Anglophones' method of resistance. In ‘Greening in Contemporary Arabic Literature”, Ghazoul (2015: 117) believes that the ex-colonized people conjure up their "idioms, myths and poetics" to resist and challenge the hegemonic powers' policies and articulate their own culture of resistance. Hence, colors have specific cultural connotations around the world. Ghazoul (2015: 118) accentuates the importance of green in Arabic culture, where "green nature is positively overdetermined in contemporary Arabic writing" and that for socioeconomic reasons and being a main source of livelihood, "green is valorized in Islam." In Arabic culture, green is associated with paradise, which is "visualized as a lush garden". Gardens, in turn, play an important role in affecting people's way of perceiving and accepting the world around them. Kreitzer (2017: n.p.), in "Healing Environment: Healing gardens" describes how "[g]ardens reduce stress and promote a sense of wellbeing. This leads to measurable psychological, physiological, and behavioral benefits, such as reduced anxiety, sadness, and other negative moods". The studied novel celebrates gardens with their greenishness as a symbol of home, which deepens feelings of repatriation, belonging, and relatedness to the people of the diaspora. On the other side, despite its association with natural landscapes, such as the sky, oceans, rivers, and seas, even though blue is employed by some novelists to present negative connotations. Blue can signify depression, sadness, isolation, illness, envy, melancholy, and even death (Hasan, Al-Sammerai and Abdul Kadir 2011: 209). This article will attempt to shed light on how the overlapping of these different discourses has helped Anglophone Arab writers to heal the rupture of their roots.

Anglophone writers employ new strategies in their writings to demonstrate their own peoples' hardship and turmoil. By reflecting their senses of either

rootedness or uprootedness from their homelands, they employ elements of Ecocriticism and Postcolonialism to reflect and permeate the other in portraying people's sentiments and affections. Anglophones also examine how human interaction and relation with the natural physical world have drastically changed in recent centuries. The Anglophone writers demonstrate how plants and water become emotional, social, and cultural indicators and markers. These writers' culture of resistance is set forth through writing back by reversing the same appliance of the intersection of art and science to deconstruct the imperial powers' strategies of hegemony. Decades later, the colonized societies responded to the academic release of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by announcing their culture of resistance, which became the cornerstone of postcolonial discourse.

2. Gardens for belonging in a dissolving homeland: A case study in Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses* (2017)

Hala Alyan, born in 1986, is a Palestinian-American novelist and psychologist. After the Gulf War in 1990, her family sought political asylum in the United States. Alyan is mostly concerned with the Palestinian diaspora, identity aspects, and the impacts of displacement. In her debut novel *Salt Houses*, she examines the life of a Palestinian family caught up between its past and present and between displacement and homeland. The book is built against the backdrop of the larger landscape of war and conflict and construes the devastating truth of diasporic people's inability to go back to their homeland.

Rubab, Rizwan, and Tahir (2019: 21) provide "a comprehensive idea of Palestinians' loss of true identity with the establishment of [what they call the] Israel state in Palestine which brought catastrophe, uprooted[ness], dispersion of Palestinian people and the emergence of refugee problems." What distinguishes Alyan's novel is her own family's experience of diaspora, where the genuine effects of displacement on the novel's characters are built upon a true story of a real lived experience. Alyan tries to define how the different Palestinian generations suffer senses of 'homelessness' that shape and reshape their emotions of displacement and alienation while in the diaspora (Rubab, Rizwan and Tahir 2019: 22).

Alyan's portrayal of her Palestinian characters' affections is creatively drawn through her manipulation of environmental elements such as water, sea, plants, and gardening. This manipulation parallels with and highlights these emotions and experiences of either alienation and displacement or belonging and rootedness. Gardening and cultivation of land are the Palestinians' everlasting means of resistance. The Palestinian land is satiated with traditional trees and plants, such as za'atar, olives, figs, orange trees, and date palms. Such staples are associated with its history, culture, and people's identity. To clarify, Zuhair and Awad (2020: 17) elucidate that:

> Israel endeavors to uproot trees planted by Palestinians over the past centuries [to] turn these gardens into empty lands, and hence, force the Palestinians to relocate in neighboring Arab countries. In defiance of these Israeli policies, Palestinians [keep] planting trees and recreating their lost paradise.

This persistent relationship between the Palestinians and their land's vegetation and gardens inspires them to challenge the Zionists' occupation and resist their attempts to uproot their identity, history, memory, and culture.

Salt Houses retraces the Yacoubs' diasporic journey, which comes as a symbol of the destiny of millions of Palestinian families who were compelled to desert their homeland and roam over the globe afterward. The narrated events begin in 1963 and are presented through the lenses of Yacoubs' progeny "who originally hail from the coastal city of Jaffa" (Awad 2020: 24). The novel opens while Salma reads the bad omens in her youngest daughter Alia's coffee cup on the eve of her wedding to Atef in Nablus, as these omens will overwhelm her whole life later. The novel mainly progresses in flashbacks and narrates the beginning of the Yacoubs' forced exodus from Jaffa to Nablus after 48's Nakba and the dispersion of their offspring outward. Salma and Hussam represent the first generation of the diaspora, with three children, Widad, Mustafa, and Alia, as the second generation.

Following the 1967 war, Salma, widowed then, leaves her homeland and her children Alia and Mustafa in Palestine, and relocates herself to Amman. Mustafa joins the resistance along with Atef, to be later arrested by the Israeli forces, and Mustafa gets killed. At that time, Alia went on a visit to her sister Widad in Kuwait. When Atef is released, he joins Alia in Kuwait and settles there with their three children, Riham, Karam, and Souad. Years later, Riham marries a Jordanian doctor, and they move to Amman with his son Abdullah. After the Gulf War in 1990, the Yacoubs scattered again. Alia and Atef settle in Amman, and Karam moves to Boston to study. He marries Boudor, Souad's friend, and they have Linah. Souad gets married to the Lebanese Elie and relocates to Paris, Boston, and finally, she is divorced in Beirut with her children Manar and Zain. Summers in Beirut have become the most distinguished time for family gatherings and recollecting the old generations' memories of their lost home, Palestine, and the coming generations' prospects of their real roots. To make roots and contextualize herself, Manar visits Palestine and "falls in love with the coastal city of Jaffa more than any other Palestinian city." (Awad 2020: 25). This love marks a long-lasting journey of alienation and dispersion.

As the novel title insinuates, the *Salt Houses* that Alyan constructs for her characters are mainly constituted of salt, which is a basic component of the sea. The ability of salt to dissolve in seawater leaves a remarkable sign of the melting and vanishing force of the seawater and of these houses as well. In Atef's mind, "the houses *float up* … like jinn" (Alyan 2017: 273). These houses are "like structures made of salt before a tidal wave comes and sweeps them away." (Alyan 2017: 273) They float up with alienation, estrangement, and displacement. Hence, Alyan's salt houses that Atef and Alia inhabit over the years "are relentlessly swept away by sea waves." (Awad 2020: 31). Alia's and Atef's lives are haunted by displacement and dislocation.

After the Palestinian exodus of 1948, Salma and Hussam experienced a sense of homelessness in their motherland when they were forcibly removed from their birthplace in Jaffa by the Israeli occupation to live in Nablus. In Jaffa home, they

used to have their roots implanted with the roots of the orange trees in their groves before the Israeli troops uproot the plants and scatter them everywhere:

> Salma and Hussam's villa sat atop a small hill that overlooked the sea with orange groves […]. Within days, the groves were mangled, soil impaled with wooden stakes, oranges scattered, pulp leaking from battered flesh. Alia had cried not at the sound of gunfire but at the smell of the mashed oranges, demanding slices of the fruit (Alyan 2017: 5-6).

The groves which they used to own have become someone else's new home. The land is replanted by the occupiers to falsely assert their belonging to and owning Palestine's land. What stuck up in Alia's childhood memory is the oranges and pomegranates of Jaffa. The fruits of her real homeland remind Alia of her roots. Alyan's treatment of the deprivation of homeland, and what accompanies it of these people's needs and senses of belonging to this home, is portrayed in the scene of the mangled groves, uprooted plants, and "mashed oranges" (Alyan 2017: 5-6). In the aftermath of the catastrophic exodus of 1948, Edward Said, as quoted in Rubab et al. (2019: 26), states that out of these events, the "Palestinian life is scattered, discontinuous, marked by the artificial and imposed arrangements of interrupted or confined space, by the dislocations and unsynchronized rhythms of disturbed time." Symmetrically, Salma and Hussam's family are scattered all over the world by the time their plants' roots have been plucked off their soil in Jaffa groves. Even their house is left to float upon the sea, abandoned and haunted by ghosts of deprivation and yearning.

The journey of alienation starts not only with Yacoubs' family but with a long line of their offspring. This experience of up-rootedness that colonization brings about sheds light on the sense of rupture that Palestinians suffer from over generations and decades. After becoming deprived of their home in Jaffa, Salma starts her life in Nablus in a house that seems eerie to her; she believes that having a garden will make her tolerate living away from her real home: “The garden is beautiful. If the house remains haunted … the garden is completely hers” (Alyan 2017: 12). The garden becomes Salma's savior from homelessness and displacement. It is a place where she can compensate for her sense of longing to belong. “I need it out,” Salma told Hussam... “I need to see the soil” (Alyan 2017:12). By realizing the fact that they are not returning to Jaffa, Salma toils the land in Nablus's house and makes her own garden. Ali J. and Sasani (2024: 3-4), in their article “Nature, Gender, and Resistance in Atwood’s Surfacing and The Handmaid’s Tale”, discuss how the “personal growth is intimately tied up with … connection to the natural world. … [As in Salma’s case,] she finds solace in [her home garden] and begins to cultivate a new sense of purpose and belonging”. Drawing on their argument, Alyan depicts “nature as a healing force … which emphasize[s] the importance of valuing and respecting the natural world.” Also, Alyan displays how planting cultivates human beings to a certain space and place. Seamon and Sowers (2008: 43) clarify that there is a "deep human need exists for associations with significant places." This justifies Salma's insistence on having her plants rooted in any place she inhabits. Salma, while "touching the sprout" (Alyan 2017:12) of her early plants, recognizes how "[t]he garden has done her proud" (ibid:12). It becomes a place with its distinctive

identity and sense of belonging to a certain space and a piece of land that has been inherited by Mustafa: "He has inherited his living mother's rooms and garden" (Alyan 2017:26). Alice Walker (1972: 408) highlights the significance and artistic implications of having a mother's garden, and explains how her mother:

> adorned with flowers, whatever shabby house [they] were forced to live in. And not just [with the] typical straggly country stand[s] of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens … uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees.

Mothers do not arbitrarily cultivate their gardens. The act of uprooting and replanting whatever plants come to their hands depicts mothers' ability to recreate and relocate their alternative homes where they and their families can belong and compensate for their lost homelands.

In *Salt Houses*, Alyan maps the psychological and locational influences of planting gardens for people in the diaspora; she portrays how Salma's garden is the symbol of home, where her children belong and are enfolded tightly around one another. After the departure of Salma to Amman, Mustafa yearns for her. Salma's garden consoles him and compensates for his sense of loneliness; there, he recollects his old self, which he has lost since his mother's absence: "A small part of him—which he already recognizes as a lost, former self—longs for his mother's garden" (Alyan 2017: 47). Alyan brings to the fore the importance of gardens for the displaced Palestinians. Furthermore, the out-front gardens are an essential component of Palestinians' homes: "[u]p ahead is another hill, small houses with vegetable gardens out front." (Alyan 2017:24). In a critical reading about house gardens, Ghazali (2013: 172) construes the reasons "to keep a garden around the house, because it is a symbol of identity, sense of place and belonging which is rooted since their ancestors." In Alyan's story, these gardens indicate the Palestinians' striving to have their roots implanted in any land they live upon, and these roots indicate their existence, character, and sense of affiliation and belonging to a certain place after their loss.

Salma overcomes her loneliness in Amman by caressing a new garden; by it, she never feels alone or miserable: "She spends her days … in the garden, an enclosed area behind the house sprawling with plants and flowers and one large, gnarled olive tree. She weeds and waters the plants herself and waits for the tomatoes and cucumbers to grow large before picking them." (Alyan 2017:106). Alexander Wilson, as quoted in Ghazali (2013:171), asserts gardens to be "landscapes that heal, connect and empower people's relations with each other and with the natural world." In fact, the idea of having a garden in each place shows an identity crisis that needs healing of homelessness rupture and the necessity for belonging somewhere and not longing for nowhere. Salma realizes her loss and substitutes it with planting for herself and for those surrounding her. Walker (1972: 408) points out that everything her mother plants grows up "as if by magic". Her garden becomes a paradigm of art for those who seek pertinence and continuity for their ancestry. For her "whatever rocky soil [her mother] land[s] on, she turn[s] into a garden." The art of Walker's mother is like Salma's pride with her achievement in

the garden in the garden whose roots she hands down to her children and grandchildren.

Whatever garden Salma recreates, she keeps remembering her garden in Palestine and passes its memory to her descendants. This painful sense of longing for a homeland moves from one generation to another and is mitigated via gardens and gardening. Salma's granddaughter Riham is affected by her grandmother's garden, though "details of it are hazy to her, almost fictional. All she knows is this garden was in Palestine" (Alyan 2017: 107). Grasping facts about her roots and her real homeland are brought to her as an imaginative reverie, and although she hears about it only from afar, her grandmother's garden still creates an intimacy between her and her original homeland and roots as a Palestinian woman. Riham's settlement in a new house in Amman reunites her with a sense of belonging to a home. She is taken by her house garden. Everything green calms her soul to stability; even her maid Rosi's native songs are "about flowers" (Alyan 2017: 107). As well, the renovation of the house adds new spaces that remind Riham of 'gardening', where "the crop of new spaces, walls, and floors blossoming, the way the house […] grew." (Alyan 2017: 107) Gardening restores her identity and origins.

The transmitted pride of owning gardens becomes a Palestinian cultural heritage and a sign of resisting erasure. Within a certain time of her life, and because of wars and invasions, Riham's garden becomes a shelter for "the desperate and moneyless" (Alyan 2017: 178) people who come to her husband for medication. The garden becomes a place of recuperation for these poor and helpless people. Richard Thompson (2018: 201) in his article "Gardening for Health" confirms that people's physical and mental health "depends on a range of […] environmental factors"; exposing these people to plants and gardens reduces "stress, fear, anger, and sadness." The significance of using gardens and green spaces as an effective treatment for different mental and physical health problems highlights the importance of this heritage for those who are dispersed and seek security and belonging. From another vein, since her early childhood, there has been a distinctive intimacy in Riham's relationship with her father, Atef. The Yacoubs' move to live in Jordan after the Gulf War tightens the father/daughter relationship. Atef and Riham have regular meetings in Riham's garden every morning. They find solace while caressing the plants and flowers; they show tenderness and concern to its sustain: "He examines the jasmine plant, a sapling, by his side. He touches a browning leaf. … They'll be fine." (Alyan 2017: 179) In the garden, both father and daughter find relief and support in each other, which stresses their attachment and belonging to one another, as well as their new alternative home in Jordan. All the Yacoubs like to spend their time in Riham's garden; it is a "magical land" (Alyan 2017: 183) of spiritual peace and self-stability. Each generation constructs a new garden with different plants and flowers for the later generation so as not to lose their sense of home, belonging, and rootedness.

While spinning the novel's plot, Alyan carefully tackles different issues of greening in her literary context. Atef's choice of "*A Lifecycle of Plants*, [to tuck] the [secretive] letters [he writes to Mustafa] in" (Alyan 2017: 83) is not a random choice. He longs for his home in Palestine and his friend Mustafa. Though Mustafa

is buried in Palestine, he is still alive as far as his memory is implanted among the plants in the *Lifecycle of Plants*, where Atef's letters are hidden. Mustafa is never alone or displaced like his other family members. Once Atef discovers that the letters have gone, he rushes into the garden; he regains himself in his garden as "his fingers sink into the soil around him, and he thinks of Nablus." (Alyan 2017:269) He recalls Salma's garden with its trees and flowers and Mustafa in it. He yearns for his real homeland in Palestine "under a fig tree." (Alyan 2017:274) The employment of plants, flowers, and gardens in manifesting human's concealed feelings and in demonstrating the historical, social, and cultural Palestinian cause has an implicit significance in *Salt Houses*. Alyan excavates into the environmental and ecological issues to unveil the lurking and hidden meanings of belonging and rootedness that play an essential role in postcolonial contexts.

As a Palestinian novelist and intellectual, Alyan struggles in post-colonial discourse to expose colonial endeavors. Her technique of writing back in diaspora sheds light on the political, historical, social, and cultural issues about the Palestinian cause and situation and raises questions about the influences of the Israeli occupation on these matters at both the personal and public levels. In the novel context, Alyan explores how these four Palestinian generations suffer homelessness, dislocation, and a clash of cultures that shape and reshape their identity, emotions, and lives. She passes over different generations and places and foregrounds plants and water roles as though contrasting but still reflecting human life positions of either rootedness or alienation. *Salt Houses* celebrates the greenish gardens as a symbol of home that deepens feelings of rootedness, belonging, and pertinence.

When presenting the turmoil of alienation, Alyan sweeps her novel characters' roots away from their homeland through the menacing force of water, rain, and the sea. Awad (2020: 30), in his article "Sea Imagery in Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*," points out that, according to Steinberg and Boelhower, "literary critics [should]go beyond the traditional view of the sea as merely a setting or as a background." (Awad 2020: 25) further argues that traditionally, "sea symbolizes mobility and motion" which "wins over houses" that symbolizes "fixity and stability". He promotes the first over the last and presents their contrast "as a divide between exile and displacement on the one hand, and belonging and rootedness, on the other." Building on Awad's argument, the contrast is drawn between the greenish environmental elements which Alyan uses as symbols of home, rootedness, and belonging, and the sea, water, and even rain which have contradicting indications of displacement and alienation.

Since the Nakba, the Palestinians' dispersal over the world has brought uprootedness, exile, and displacement to the fore as essential issues in reshaping their identity either in the interior or exterior diaspora. In Mustafa's life, water has a sinister presence. Mustafa's courtship with his beloved Aya is doomed to separation. "Once, [Mustafa] brought a creased photograph of his father's—*a view of the sea*, a print from their old house in Jaffa" (Alyan 2017:33) to copy it. The picture that stands between Aya and Mustafa is of a blurred sea, which signifies alienation and separation from each other. Mustafa has a pressing inclination to be

part of the resistance movements. His encounter with Imam Bakri in the mosque of Nablus ignited his spirit of resistance. The Imam used to incite men to fight the Israeli troops. Mustafa yearns to meet Imam Bakri alone, as he "became smitten [with his words]. The man was awfully magnetic, and more than anything Mustafa wanted to be found, wanted the imam to focus on his face among *the sea* of congregants and recognize something there." (Alyan 2017: 38) In her description of the "sea" Alyan highlights Mustafa's senses of loneliness and alienation even when among people. Mustafa's desire for his face to be located among "*the sea* of congregants" shows how lost he feels and signifies the force of attraction that has lured Mustafa to follow this flow and to relocate himself in his homeland. Alyan has planned the confrontation between Mustafa and Imam Bakri to happen during a rainstorm. In their meeting, Imam Bakri tells Mustafa the heartbreaking story of a Palestinian family who used to live by the sea of Haifa. The suffering of this family started when the Israeli soldiers committed a crime against their daughter. Since that time, the family has pulled out their roots and scattered away. This dramatic imagery and the agonizing experiences that Alyan presents upon the sea and during a rainstorm reflect themes of displacement, alienation, and deprivation. At that moment, Mustafa ached for his mother's garden (Alyan 2017:43 - 44), a hint of the remarkable role that greenish places play in reinforcing the characters' sense of belonging. Though the fisherman in Imam Bakri's story hated the hills and cried out for the sea, the hills have been the only Palestinian space that has embraced his body after his death. The "dignity of death" that the Israeli occupation has taken away from the dispersed Palestinians by the sea has returned to them in Palestine's groves, hills, and gardens. Consequently, the power of floating among "*the sea* of congregants" (Alyan 2017: 38) ended Mustafa's life.

In her reading of the Palestinians' post-Nakba generation and memory, Milshtein (2009: 71-72) construes that "[n]early all refugees insisted that the younger generation carries on the commitment to return, instilling in them the feeling of being uprooted and a yearning for something missing—an awareness so powerful that the youth felt as if they had experienced the Nakba." Within their daily pursuits and practices, these diasporic figures seek to preserve the "Nakba memory" and pass it to the younger generations. The most traumatic of Yacoubs' three children, and the one who has been most affected by this memory, is Alia. "Alia is a child of war. She was barely three when the Israeli army rolled through Jaffa's streets" (Alyan 2017: 5). Alyan presents Alia as afflicted by nostalgia, loss, and yearning, which associates her more with water and seas than gardens and plants. Throughout her life, Alia longs for the sense of belonging to a place that will compensate for her real lost homeland. In 1967, Alia's visit to Widad in Kuwait City ended ruefully. Israel has won the war, and the remaining parts of Palestine have fallen into its control, while Alia is watching "the jets screeching over the Mediterranean" (Alyan 2017:61). The signs of deprivation from returning home wave on the horizon of the Mediterranean, initiating a long journey of dislocation and estrangement. Since then, Alia finds herself "unable to find relief anywhere" (Alyan 2017:51), and she has recurring dreams "of icy lakes, of walking into an enormous refrigerator," in another is "scenery of water, pillars shooting out of the

ocean" (Alyan 2017:142-147) and dreaming of a "marshland" and someone "telling her to turn around, that it is about to rain. […] There is hail. Someone is dying". All these dreams consist of water, rain, flooding water, and hail, anticipating Alia's ominous life and future.

The opening of Alia's first part of narration confirms her traumatic experiences that inaugurate her exilic life in the diaspora. Her struggle with breathing under the hot water and stream in Kuwait foreshadows a parallel struggle with senses of alienation and detachment in her early days of pregnancy: "For a moment she is submerged, without breath. She stands under the water until her lungs ache." (Alyan 2017:48) Alia's aching is depicted through water imagery while she "continues to cling to the hope of returning to her motherland one day" (Awad 2020: 34). Oblivious of what is going around her, memories of her home come running out of her mind and starts thinking of her mother's garden before it's ravaging, the place that has witnessed the love story of her and Atef.

Once Alia grasps that returning to Palestine is a far-flung hope, the urge of this realization pushes her to join the sea: "The water. […] . Take me to the water." (Alyan 2017: 72-74) This choice sheds light on Alia's shattered self out of alienation and estrangement, for her "[n]ostalgia is an affliction […] the longing for what had vanished wasting a person away." Upon the shoreline, Alia remembers all the things she hates in Kuwait: the heat, the dampness, "the loamy odor everywhere" (Alyan 2017:76). Her hatred of Kuwait comes from her feelings of displacement and exile in it, but willy-nilly Kuwait is the place where she will spend the rest of her life in dislocation. The acceptance of this reality has its effects, such as Alia's self-distraction, which is translated into Alzheimer's several years later. Alia has never accepted the idea of loss that she suffers from; Kuwait is not the right choice for an alternative home; she thinks maybe Amman is the right one. The idea of choosing another place of alienation comes to Alia as a "rainfall' (Alyan 2017:59), an ominous thought. As "Palestine has vanished for them […], [which means] a new death every morning: Mustafa gone, Nablus gone—but they can find the ashes in Amman, collect them to build another life." The presence of Alia's mother, relatives, and friends, as well as the nearness of Amman to Palestine, are all reasonable reasons for Alia's striving to move to Amman. It is a place where she can try to belong: "Amman has knotted like a *vine* in Alia's mind" (Alyan 2017: 60). Alyan connects Alia's "salvaged life" of belonging to "a vine" that will grow in Amman, while in Kuwait "the despair is a lake she must move across, [with] water in her lungs" (Alyan 2017:67). In and by the sea, water, and rain, Alyan shakes Alia's "state of equilibrium" that Awad (2020: 35) discusses in his article. Even the death of Alia's mother is described as "a momentous thunderstorm" (Alyan 2017:139) in winter. It has been raining heavily when Salma, at her deathbed, remembers the bad omens she has read in Alia's cup on the eve of her wedding, a depiction that enhances the sense of loss and anticipates alienation.

Alyan dramatizes the novel events that relate to displacement. Realizing the fact that the characters do not have a home to return to is at the core of the novel's reading. They only confront "loss after loss after loss, as though rehears[ing]." (Alyan 2017:141) Qutait (2021: 123), in her book *Nostalgia in Anglophone Arab*

Literature, states that "nostalgia for the homeland is a crucial component in forming the bonds of community and belonging in [the] diaspora." The diasporic figures in the novel share the fate of expatriation and yearning to belong. When Alia runs from home after fighting with Souad, she heads to the sea with a box of figs. The choice of figs is a sign of nostalgia and homelessness that Alia feels and hides, as figs are one of the most popular Palestinian fruits. At the sea, she meets Telar, a Kurdish refugee who has a fateful experience with warfare, diaspora, and exile. Telar recounts the tribulation of her family by the regime of Saddam in the north of Iraq. The memories that both women conjure up upon the seashore foster their doomed experiences of alienation and displacement as they sympathize with each other. Alia feels nostalgic even "for something that has gone nowhere" (Alyan 2017:154). The conflicting emotions inside Alia oscillate between lost memories of her childhood in her homeland, Palestine, and her present home in Kuwait. Qutait (2021: 6) draws on Svetlana Boym's views, where Boym says that "nostalgia is 'not merely an artistic device but a strategy of survival, [for] the impossibility of homecoming." Though decades have passed, Alia still defies the loss of her homeland and resists the sense of homelessness.

By Atef's arrival in Kuwait, Alyan leans to water to describe his restlessness and traumatized self. Memories of Palestine and Mustafa heavily haunt his early life in Kuwait. Under the bathwater, Alia discovers her husband's traumatized experience in Israeli prisons. The scratches and wounds on his body resemble the ones on his shattered self. Even his dreams are shots of drowning in oceans and water. Through water images, Alyan hints at the estrangement and exile Alia and Atef currently stand within in their early days out of Palestine. The loss of Mustafa, Palestine, and self-recognition have all created a rupture within Atef's soul, which he thinks will never heal. Like many of the writers of diaspora, Alyan endeavors to juxtapose the real homeland of her novel's characters and the alternative home into which they are dispersed. They are haunted by memories of their homeland, a sense of loss, and the painful experience of exile to strange lands. Said (2002: 180) states that "[e]xile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted." Atef needs to overcome his sense of guilt through an attempt to relocate himself somewhere rather than his and Mustafa's Palestine. As years pass, Atef narrates the Yacoubs' exilic journey to his grandchildren. During his conversation about their different houses, Atef "instinctively touch[es] the soil" (Alyan 2017: 273), which sheds light on his intense need for belonging and attachment. It is a Palestinian saga that passes from one generation to another over and over.

The need for belonging that Riham and Atef strive to own is contrary to Souad's rebellious nature and life. Souad is not sentimental, so she is neither attached to her mother, Alia, nor to her father, Atef. What differentiates Atef from Souad is her challenging character. Souad is used to rebelling against her parents and always goes against the flow. Unlike Atef, he is a sentimental person attached to his family, past, homeland, and even his dead friend Mustafa. The belonging that Atef seeks in Riham's garden is lost in Souad's content with displacement,

detachment, and alienation, which she adapts in her life. Souad's memories of her childhood home in Kuwait are related to Kuwait's zoo (Alyan 2017:173), where she used to belong. In Kuwait, she used to have a map in her room as a sign of her deep sense of dislocation from home, which she locates only on a raw map. After leaving Kuwait, she no longer sought to belong, and her life became alienated. Nevertheless, as a woman, Souad becomes as detached from her family, children, and self as much as possible. Her eagerness to swim and her destiny to live "[n]ear the Corniche" (Alyan 2017:204) in Beirut's blue apartment all underscore her rebellious nature. Years later, Alia and Atef's children's settlement in Beirut continues the destiny of alienation for the Yacoubs. The Beirut apartments, where Karam and Souad live, have significant colors concerning their inhabitants. Karam's green apartment is associated with self-conciliation and attachment to something. On his balcony, "[t]here are several potted plants with large, purplish leaves that [Karam] waters every morning." (Alyan 2017: 245) Though both Karam and Budur are expatriated from two occupied countries, they find compensation and a sense of belonging in each other, their families, and their content love. However, Souad lives in a blue apartment, which is the color of seawater, oceans … etc. Souad herself is just like the sea that she loves; she is swept away from herself and her family and uprooted from her homeland. That's why she "never remembers to water [her plants]. Her balcony is strewn with dead plants." Souad is a woman of exile and alienation; she coexists with detachment and never struggles for settlement and belonging.

On the contrary, Souad's daughter, Manar, has a different way of perceiving herself, her family, and her roots. Manar, as one of the fourth generation, examines the ancestor's feelings of distraction and displacement from their roots. The stories that Manar used to hear from her grandparents about Palestine have motivated her to search for her origins. She takes a trip to her grandparent's house in Palestine to reclaim her buried roots. She believes "the trip would restore in her some faith, a land to which she'd feel unflinching attachment" (Alyan 2017: 283). By Jaffa's Sea, Manar envisions herself "kneeling to gather handfuls of soil into her pocket." (ibid: 283) The soil of her homeland restores and reclaims her lost homeland, her feelings of alienation, and her identity. At the seashore of Jaffa, Manar feels "that desire, the old wanting, to say something. For someone to bear witness as she speaks" (Alyan 2017: 295). According to Tahrir Hamdi (2011: 23) in her article "Bearing Witness", the Palestinian "writers and artists of resistance have taken it upon themselves to *bear witness* to an unspeakable past, something which dominant History has been bent on silencing." Alyan takes it upon herself to deconstruct the false narratives through which the colonizers dominate History.

In *Salt Houses*, Alyan's choice of one of the fifth Palestinian generation of the diaspora to write back against the Israeli's forged history is of significance. Alyan here plays the role of the Palestinian intellectual who bents to restore and reclaim his people's right to regain their homeland. Manar starts drawing the Yacoubs' family tree, a testimony of their existence and belonging to and on the shoreline of Jaffa. But Manar's attempt to refute the Zionist justifications for confiscating the sea of Jaffa is interrupted by a "large wave [that comes and] washes

over the sand, [while] the water eat[s] her words, [in the same way that] her family come and gone in this sea" (Alyan 2017: 294) detached and alienated from their homeland. Said (2000: 180) argues that "[t]he achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever"; the Yacoubs' striving to reconnect the roots that have been taken out by exile goes in vain. The end of the novel shows the clash between the contrasting elements of tree and sea – which parallel belonging and alienation - where alienation wins over belonging, reflected in the way that the sea waves uproot the Palestinians from their selves and homeland.

3. Conclusion

Though different in literary tenets, the integration that Ecocriticism and Postcolonialism demonstrate expands the main implementations of their theoretical framework. When water sweeps humans into estrangement, and plants implant their roots of belonging, the role of both courses comes to challenge the traditional way of applying the two theories in concept. The study redefines the implementation of natural elements in literary writings; it examines the connectedness of Ecocriticism and Postcolonialism in presenting issues of diasporic impacts on people through natural elements. It explores the methods by which Anglophone writers manipulate their environmental surroundings in their literary writings to sympathize with their diasporic emotions. Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses* revolves around its characters' emotions, as they are longing for belonging by planting and gardening while estranged in alienation by floating.

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