

Searching for Home from the Land of Exile: The Trio of War, Exile and Memory in Nada Awar Jarrar's *Somewhere Home*

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In today's world, the conception of home is problematic in the sense that it becomes fluid and always in flux. Since no one today is purely one thing, there is a commitment in many diasporic writings to move beyond the simplistic or single meaning of home towards a transnational home. Nada Awar Jarrar's *Somewhere, Home* (2002) is a case in point. The novel presents the life journeys of three different women and the impact of war on their lives, which brings them to a point where they are compelled to find home away from home. At the heart of Jarrar's novel, there is an emphasis on the exilic experience from home and family due to the catastrophic consequences of war. In this regard, war appears as a persistent theme throughout the novel. The unifying thread between war, home, and exile is vividly seen through the motif of a village house in the hills above Beirut, which indeed provides an unattainable symbol of home to characters in the novel. *Somewhere, Home* meticulously comprises three parts, each one deals with a completely different set of characters. The effect of the Lebanese civil war drove many people away from their homes in search of a more peaceful place to reside in, but being away from their homeland, many of them hoped to see the war come to an end and return in search of the peace that they once lived in. The novel examined here portrays a common sense of belonging and homesickness that many people belonging to countries affected by war may share. The loneliness of exile and the misery of the war worsen the plight of the Lebanese immigrants and here Jarrar tries to depict the feeling of dispersal and uprootedness in her masterpiece *Somewhere, Home*. The novel tends to shed light upon the sufferings of those in exile. The novel particularly focuses on and portrays the effects of the civil war in Lebanon and the pains of exile in the lives of Lebanese women.



Key words: *Exile, Lebanese civil war, memory, fluidity, transnational home. Nada Awar, Somewhere, Home.*

Introduction

It has been estimated by researchers that about 150 million people live outside the country of their birth today, as globalisation has reached new distant lands with the turn of the 21st century. Many immigrants and refugees have suffered displacement due to wars caused by political and economic instability.¹ The number of people fleeing violence, poverty and religious conflicts are increasing daily; people are migrating in search of betterment and development, some are even migrating in search of home and security. With the recent complexities of the past several years in Arabian countries due to religious and political divergences, many Arabs had to leave their homelands in search of a better life. Those whose financial disabilities have prevented them from taking their families with them suffer twice as they have been split between maintaining life in their host countries and caring for their families back home. Some of them have settled in western countries such as America and Australia, accepting the difference in culture and adjusting with the difficulties. However, some suffer from the pains of exile and could not cope with the cultural complexities. In such cases, where the men of the family have to travel away from home in order to provide food and shelter to their families left behind in war-infested countries, the women of these families have to suffer a lot as they become in charge of family expenses and affairs. They suffer from self-exile, excess of responsibilities and an associated depletion of agency.

About Nada Awar Jarrar

Nada Awar Jarrar is a contemporary Lebanese novelist whose novels on exile and love of country and home have generated international attention. Her first novel, *Somewhere, Home* (2003), won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (2004) and Best First Book, South East Asia, and South Pacific as well. Before settling back in Lebanon, she lived in London, Paris, Sydney and Washington D.C. She lives in Beirut currently. Her other novels are *Dreams of Water* (2007), *A Good Land* (2009), and *An Unsafe Haven* (2016). Almost all her novels are set in Lebanon and deal with the refugee crisis, war and exile.

The novel, *Somewhere Home*, tells the story of three different Lebanese women, each of them away from their real homes, all in search for somewhere that can be called home; somewhere

¹ See, The International Migration Report 2017. Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/international-migration-report-2017.html>

they can call their own. Maysa returns to the old family house that belonged to her grandparents and was once situated in a village high on the slopes of Mount Lebanon. Aida, who left the country of her birth with her parents and sisters, returns to fulfil her promise in search of the Palestinian refugee who was a second father to her when she was a child. Salwa, now an old woman, recollects memories of her past life her hospital bed, surrounded by her family; but still, she is away from home. Unlike other novels that discuss and praise the adventures of male migrants during war, this novel describes the exile and suffering the women left behind have to undergo due to war. The novel is divided into three short novellas each presenting a different journey of a woman and her relation to her surroundings. Each story presents the main women characters in an attempt to reconcile their past and their present. The novel presents the journeys of these women in the realm of memory, loss, exile, and a sense of longing coloured by transient moments of happiness and a desperate desire to belong.

Women, War and Exile in Islamic History

Throughout Arab and Islamic history, women have played an important role in war. For instance, Aisha, Prophet Mohammed's wife, was part of the Battle of the Camel, sometimes called the Battle of Jamal or the Battle of Bassorah. That battle took place in Basra in 36 AH.² Generally speaking, Islam did not deny women their desire to participate in war, and while their participation was based on their own desire, war was only obligatory for men. Hind bint 'Utbah was another Arab woman who lived in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, who was one of the most famous women who fought the Prophet Muhammad, before embracing Islam. Islam did not prevent the participation of women in battles but restricted their roles to providing logistical support. Their roles were often confined to treating the wounded and preparing food for the men who participated in war. Nusseibeh bint Ka'ab was another known name in Arab and Islamic history who played the same role in Islamic wars that the Red Cross plays now. She carried water and aid to fighters and even took part in defending the Prophet. Asma bint Yazid ibn Al-Sakan accompanied the Prophet in the Battle of Khyber and participated with the Muslims in their war against the Romans during the Battle of Yarmuk. At that time, Asma was the head of the women in the war. Eugene Rogan, author of the bestselling *The Fall of The Ottomans: The Great War of The Middle East*, (2015) found evidence of the Ottomans employing women as snipers during World War 1, some of whom were killed during battle. The Allies did not know they were women, but they were perfectly trained at sniping, and battled in the same attire as their male counterparts. Women played different roles during the Algerian War (1954 to 1962) too, also known as the Algerian Liberation War. Many of them were part of the National Liberation

² I'm referring here to the Islamic lunar calendar which began its count in 622 CE. During that year, the prophet Muhammad and his followers migrated from Mecca to Madena

Front. According to a post-war survey the number of women in the war amounted to 11,000. Women were very active in war, some of them taking part directly in the conflict, while others served as fundraisers, as well as nurses, providing other services to the battling revolutionaries.³ In addition, the role played by some Algerians throughout the conflict with the French troops cannot be overlooked. They participated in bringing down several civilian and military targets during the war. The recognition of the role of Djamila Boupacha and Djamila Bouhired around the world is a major indication of the importance of their role, and the role of women in general in the conflict. Leila Khaled is perhaps one the most famous and influential figures among the women of the Palestinian liberation movement, after she became a symbol of armed resistance against Israeli forces between the end of the '60s and the early '70s. Despite her age, she remains a spokesperson for the Palestinian cause, touring the world and giving lectures.

The Lebanese War through Fiction

Lebanon, though being a small country with a small population, has historically suffered from several political and religious conflicts. There are eighteen different officially recognised religions in Lebanon and the beginning of the civil war was a religious conflict. The Lebanese civil war lasted from 1975 to 1990 and resulted in a very large number of victims and many people were displaced from their homes. Almost one million people migrated from Lebanon as a result of the war. The families of these people were left behind to live the memory of loss (Clausewitz, 2006).

Before the war, Lebanon was largely divided into Sunni Muslims and Christians who were larger in number around the coastal areas and the Shiite Muslims being mainly based in the south and east. The relationship between politics and religion had hardened under the command of the French colonisers in Lebanon that lasted from 1920 to 1943, and the parliamentary organisation privileged a primary position for the Christians. However, the country had a large Muslim population and many pan-Arabism groups opposed the western government. The enterprise of the state of Israel and the displacement of a hundred thousand Palestinian refugees to Lebanon during the 1948 and 1967 mass departure changed the demographic stability in favour of the Muslim population. These wars and revolutions caused a lot of chaos in the lives of the Lebanese people, and many had to flee the country in search of a better livelihood. Many left their families behind which caused more trouble as women were left in the countryside and mountains to take care of their children and their husbands' families all by themselves. Others who migrated along with their families also

³ For more a better understanding, see Danièle Djamila et al. "Women and Politics in Algeria from the War of Independence to Our Day", pp. (62-77)

suffered with raising their children away from their homeland. It becomes a difficult task to cultivate patriotism for their homeland and their culture and traditions in their children who mainly grow up in a western community.

Many writers tackled the topic of war in their novels with the backdrop of the Lebanese war. Some of the writers worth mentioning are Hanan Al Shaykh, Hoda Barakat, Zeina Abirached, Iman Humaydan and Darina Al-Joundi. Some of their works are originally written in Arabic and translated to English and other languages, and some are written in English. Most of the writers wrote out of their personal experiences and suffering. Others turned memoirs into fiction (Cooke, 1987).

“The Desire to belong”, Maysa’s Journey in *Somewhere, Home*

The first part of the novel starts with the story of a Lebanese woman named Maysa who is pregnant and comes back to her ancestral home to give birth to her child. She leaves behind her husband and stays alone in the big house trying to feel the spirit of her grandmother who had lived there years ago. This whole chapter is divided into parts which give an account of all the main women characters in the life of the protagonist Maysa, including her mother, grandmother and aunt. The chapter presents the sense of longing and exile each woman experiences individually. Maysa’s sense of detachment and exile forces her to go back to the only place where her grandmother had managed to keep the whole family together on her own. She tries to sense the strength and power of her grandmother while she conceives her child inside her womb. She tells her husband that she is moving to the village on the mountain because she is afraid of the war and what it might cause her and the baby, but Wadih, her husband, knows well that her reasons for going back to that house lie deeper. Maysa seeks the sense of security one feels at one’s own home and she is searching for it in that house. She is looking for the place where she could feel she is at home. The desire of belonging to one’s home is desperately described in the lines where Maysa thinks of her child and says,

To comfort myself I think that my child will be different from the rest. She will have my dark hair, the sultry green eyes of her father and her skin will glow somewhere between gold and olive. I shall call her Yasmeena and dress her in shades of blue and yellow, and she will grow up to recognise the scents of pine and gorse just like her mother. (8)

These lines show how Maysa wishes her daughter to be different in the sense that she does not grow up in a war-torn place and in exile from home. Instead, she wants her to grow up knowing the scents of her motherland where she mentions olives, pine and gorse that are symbols of Lebanon. The passage describes the sensory and existential quality of memory

and how that situates the human subject at a time of political crisis. It also highlights the wish-fulfilling quality of human imagination during the violence of war. In a spatiotemporal sense, memory here ceases to be a backward-looking function and instead emerges as nostalgia as well as aspiration. In her book *The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora: Representations of Place and Transnational Identity*, Jumana Bayeh speaks on the fluidity and mobility of home in *Somewhere, Home*. Bayeh argues that home is “[...] both subversive and easily overlooked in favour of celebrating the novel’s supposedly feminist agenda and its ability to universalise the plight of all those who are homeless” (138). The novel thus dismantles the notion of a fixed and single home and highlights the predicament of the homeless due to the Lebanese civil war (Gertz, 2014).

The story of Alia was much different from any of the other women in her time. Alia was married at a very early age of nineteen and her husband Ameen worked in Africa leaving her alone to take care of herself, the children and the big house. There was always a sense of longing in Alia’s heart to see her husband and tell him how much she needed him and his care, but she never told him. In one part of the novel when Alia’s children are saved from the collapse of the school building, she feels vulnerable and helpless. She asks the village priest to write a letter for her to her husband telling him how much she misses him but later she tells her daughter Saeeda that she never sent the letter. Alia and Maysa share a spiritual bond through which one draws strength from the other. The writer describes the power of war and exile in terms of what it can cause to a person in the situation. Alia lives in exile away from her husband in her own home,

‘I wrote him a letter once, asking him to come home,’ she said with a weak smile. ‘It was after the two older boys were hurt when the school collapsed over them.’ She shook her head and looked past Saeeda. ‘I never sent it.’ Why didn’t you let him know you needed him, mother?’ Saeeda wanted to ask. (41)

The unsent letter here becomes a metaphor for missing communication during wartime, inhabiting the liminal space between the desire to connect and the fear of erasure. She was a woman who took care of her boys alone and there was no option to feel weak. Her husband was abroad working for them and war had led him away from home in search of a better opportunity. The war had led her away from her husband too and her children away from their father. This was the case not only then but also now in many parts of the Arab world which war has covered over with its dark shadows. In one part of the novel, Alia is wondering about her husband’s facial features in the letter she had asked the priest to write for her (Hourani, 2013),

And try as I might, Ameen, even deep in the night when I am in bed and restless, I cannot see your face; your features, fine and grave, escape me. Are his eyes round or almond-shaped? I ask myself. (23)

Alia wonders how her husband's facial details look as he is always away and she barely finds the time to be with him. The passage above indicates how oblivion becomes an internalised condition during wartime which produces absences and interruptions. These little details are a kind of suffering caused by exile as well. Maysa recalls the strength that once Alia had brought into this old house and she is trying to feel it again but there is nothing left but shadows:

This house, this old, dilapidated house, was once a castle, alive and spilling over with energy. My grandmother sat in a wooden-backed chair at the southern window, watching for the last of her children running home from school, and now there are shadows where she has been, shadows without sunlight, clouding my vision, filling me with fear. (9).

The fear here is of exile and the loss of home and identity that war had caused. Edward Said, in his seminal essay *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (2000) spoke about exile, saying that,

Exile 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. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. (173).

Exile being Edward W. Said's political condition is better expressed by him as an experienced person. Being a Palestinian who grew up in Egypt and the United States, he has been a leading figure in the Palestinian struggle for nationhood. Even at the national level, Said critiques almost all forms of national identity politics to be ever fully at home there or anywhere. Said expresses his views on exile from his own experience and from what he had observed from the lives of other intellectuals who had experienced exile and displacement. Thus, according to him, Exile is moreover a state of mind, one that can be shared by all who resist the comfort of provincial loyalties, even when they live in the nation of their homeland.

In the first part of the novel, Maysa seems too concerned about the place she will deliver her baby girl in and when she eventually decides to go back to the big family house, she does not want to leave it until she feels that she has finally got the strength to carry on herself without

being dependant on the memories of the women in her family. By the end when she comes to visit her husband and daughter, her husband tells her if she has had enough of ‘the mountain now?’ and she tells him ‘how did you know?’(72) Her husband asks her whether she is ready to come back to her real family and to leave the memories of her family behind (Jarrar, 2007).

The novel does not only portray the sufferings of a person suffers due to exile, but also the collective loss of families. As Said described it, the pain of exile is a feeling a person suffers emotionally and physically. When Fouad being a little boy misses his father, who has gone to Africa for work, he cries and says innocently that he is going to Africa to find him. Sheikh Abu Khalil, a man from the village sees him and light-heartedly offers to give him a ride.

‘I’ll find him,’ muttered the little boy. ‘I’ll walk to Africa.’

‘Africa. You want to go see your father? Come up and ride. I’ll take you to Africa.’(19)

Fouad is just a little boy who senses the difference in his life because of the absence of his father. His mother Alia also feels the need for her husband’s presence but does not ever openly admit it. Women in the absence of their husbands are supposed to act strong and that is what Alia does by playing the part of the strong member of the family who keeps the family together alone.

Finding Home in Exile

The second part of the novel starts with the story of Aida and her struggle with her guilt of returning home. Aida leaves Lebanon with her family as a teenage girl, promising Amou Mohammed, a father-like person whom she loved dearly, that she will be back someday.

Then he lifted both his hands above his head and waved to the cars as they drove away. Aida put her head out the window and shouted to him. ‘I’ll be back, Amou Mohammed. I promise I’ll be back.’ (78)

And when she hears of his death years later through a telephone call, she is so much overtaken by grief that she starts seeing Amou Mohammed’s spirit, which keeps calling her back as she had promised.

She turned to look at him, his handsome face and slim frame breathing beside her, and simply shook her head. They sat together until the sun began to fade and before he left he asked her, ‘When are you coming home?’ (80)

However, going back becomes a dream as the situation of the country worsens because of war and Aida and her sisters grow up away from home, embracing Europe as their new home. When Aida hears of Amu Mohammed's death, a sense of guilt surrounds her as she could not fulfil her promise of going back to her homeland. The spirit accompanying her keeps reminding her of her homeland and her promise. It is a metaphor for Lebanon which in a way is calling back to those who have left. The ghost of Amu Mohammed is the spiritual bond that keeps her connected with her homeland where she spent her childhood with Amu Mohammed and her sisters. She recalls all the happiness and the ups and downs she had seen as a child with Amu Mohammed always by her side to help her and pick her up whenever she falls. The memories of happiness lead her back home. At one point when Aida is walking back home in the rain, Amu Mohammed appears and asks her why she is sad. She says that she has been in dark shadows for a very long time and she longs for the sunlight that she used to enjoy at home. 'It rains back home too,' said Amou Mohammed. 'I know. But for some reason I only remember the sunlight' (106). She longs for the sunlight which refers to the hopeful dawn after the darkness of war back in Lebanon. The case here is a reference to all those who had to leave Lebanon and settle in the United States, Australia or Europe because of the war and in search of a better life and opportunity for their children and themselves. The bitterness of exile may not create hatred in the hearts of such people against the countries they decide to settle in, but it gives them a sense of detachment that parts between them and their actual homeland where their forefathers had once lived peacefully and had dreamt of a peaceful life for their children too (Lang, 2016).

Identity Crisis and Traditional Gap

Endorsing culture and maintaining a real identity is one more issue that many people have to suffer with their children especially those who are actually born in the West or grow up there. Engrossing cultural, traditional and religious values becomes quite difficult in the minds of these children and they start absorbing the cultures of the West, which may sometimes become a hard issue for the parents to deal with. This also creates a traditional gap that separates parents who have suffered exile and feel the importance of home, and their children who have taken up the other culture and traditions and are quite happy with it knowing less why their parents have to be so worried. In the third part of the novel when old Salwa is on her hospital bed she recalls how she got married at an early age and had to leave her homeland Lebanon all of a sudden and leave behind her mother and sister, which creates a kind of fear in her mind that later comes out when her son Richard tells her that her grandson Nabil wants to stay with her and leave Lebanon.

'You're going to help him abandon his home?'

'Nabil will be with us. We all love him and he's happy being here.'

I shake my head and reach for Richard's arm. 'You mustn't let this happen, Richard, please. Promise me you won't, dear. Promise you'll send him back where he belongs.'(192).

Salwa is afraid Nabil will leave his home and indulge in the cultures of the West and eventually forget his homeland and his values. Salwa's children grow up enthralled by Western culture, and without any love or attachment for their actual home. Salwa had once left her home and lived in a foreign land where she kept searching for the sense of homeliness but couldn't. She does not want to see her children and grandchildren do the same. When Salwa was small, her father had left her, and the longing for her father becomes a metaphor for exile. She misses the sense of security a girl might feel in the presence of her father. Salwa experiences the pain exile can cause more than once in her life. The loss of her father, then her marriage to an older man and then her leaving the country and her parent's house, which carry all her childhood memories, are all the effects of exile that Salwa suffers from. The pain of being away from her children is also a kind of exile she lives throughout her old age (Loomba, 1998).

The Common Pain of Exile

The writer has connected all three stories of the three different women together, weaving each story into the other. She has used this technique to give the reader a sense that all these people are related to each other by the feeling of exile and displacement that binds them. It also gives the reader a feeling that the occurrence they are experiencing may be experienced with others too, but one may not know. In the second story of Aida, when she goes to Mount Lebanon with her doctor friend, she sees the house where Maysa's family had lived and the doctor tells her about his encounter with a strange pregnant woman he had treated, who used to live in the house alone. The doctor is the same in the first story of Maysa. Aida feels a sense of home and belonging after seeing Maysa's house. She wonders why Maysa had left her family to stay alone in the house. The house on Mount Lebanon seems to indirectly connect all the women in the novel, intertwining their fates together. The house, however, may be looked upon as a metaphoric sense of homeliness and belonging.

Back in the city, Aida continued to think of the house in the mountains. She imagined walking through its front door, wandering through spacious, light-filled rooms and feeling once again the peace that she had found there (126).

The common feeling of being at home again is quite normal for people who have gone through the same experience of exile. Aida could feel the same comfort and homeliness that Maysa had come seeking for in the house on the mountains. When later Aida tells Kameel, her doctor friend that she had an idea of opening a nursery in that house, he frowned at the

idea, telling her what made her think someone would so easily give away her home to her. A home is filled with memories of love and family, and to Kameel, a person who had witnessed the years of war in his country; it is difficult for a person to give away their home. Kameel replies, 'It's always like this. People like you return, not having known the terrible years of the war, and you want to teach us about life'(127). However, he does not understand that she had suffered years of exile too (Maleh, 2009).

In the third story of the novel, when Salwa's daughter May sends her photos of her husband and daughters, a certain picture catches her attention where May's husband Riyadh and their son Nabil is standing with a couple near a huge stone house on the mountains. Nabil tells his grandmother that the woman is his father's cousin and that she lives with her daughter Yasmeena alone there. The woman in the picture is Maysa from the first story again and the idea that her daughter Yasmeena is away from her father gives her a sense of grief remembering her own loss for her father who had left them too. In the last part of the novel, she says that she felt that the stone house was familiar. She says to Richard in the end, 'Tell her I just meant the house looked very familiar, that's all' (202). This sense of familiarity comes from the common feelings these people share. The sense of exile and longing from home that Maysa and Aida had felt too. The house felt so familiar that Salwa at first mistakes it for her own childhood house where she was born.

Conclusion

Reading Jarrar's *Somewhere, Home* from a transnational context sharpens the need to think keenly about the bitterness of exile and displaced persons. Home for Jarrar is fluid and is always in influx. There is also a tendency to go beyond the essentialised formations of identity towards a transnational way of belonging. Thus, as the title of the novel suggests, home is not stable, it is somewhere. As a diasporic writer, Jarrar meticulously unmask the precarious positions of exiles who fluctuate between the dream of return and the need to be culturally adjusted in the host home. The roles of women are often challenged during war, whether the reason is the absence of the male head of the family or his death. The chaotic nature of war often forces women to become in charge and their traditional duties are burdened with other duties that their husbands or fathers would have shared. This in no means indicates that women get more freedom or flexibility of living, it rather increases their duties and responsibilities in addition to the constant reminder that a lonely widow or wife should stay in her limits. These typically traditional structures were redrawn placing women in charge while the war broke in Lebanon. However, these women found themselves imprisoned by other boundaries and structures created by society. The protagonists in the three stories of the novel found themselves bound to such duties and fate too. Maysa left her husband who was the only family she had in order to go back to the old family house to give birth to her daughter Yasmeena. She remembered her grandmother and aunt constantly during



the months of her pregnancy as she tried to search for the spiritual strength they had from the house. She recalled the stories about her grandmother Alia and how at a very early age she had become in charge of a big house full of people and children, and was expected to fill the gap left by her husband who had gone abroad for a better life. During war, women suffer more than men in many aspects. Many women are left widowed with small children to raise, many are raped and tortured. These women suffer most in exile, whether it is exile away from home, or exile within their homes away from their families. The burden they carry is much higher than that of men.

History has witnessed many women figures who had proved that they are equal participants in wars and battles, however women have also suffered rape, violence, detention and exile because of wars. Many women had to work to support their families financially because of the death of their husbands or fathers or sometimes because of their leaving or fleeing the country for a better life. In the novel, almost all the women characters suffered because of the same cause. They were all attached to each other in one way or another because they shared one common pain of longing for home. They are all connected with the pain of exile and the sense of belonging. Each suffers in a different way, yet stay connected. In short, the writer has brought out the story's narration in such a way that all the characters seem to be attached to one main point, which is the mountain house. By the end of the novel, Salwa corrects her mistake by saying that the house in the picture is not her own, but it just seems so familiar. To conclude, one may point out this familiarity being the common sensation of living in exile away from one's home that connects all the women in the story, and the house becomes the door through which they would be set free someday.



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