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Research paper

Destroyed Houses as Repositories of Memories: Navigating Diasporic Spaces in Shahla Ujayli's Novels

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ABSTRACT

Over the past half century, numerous Arab diasporic writers have depicted the detrimental impacts of civil wars on Arab nations as some individuals are (in)voluntarily displaced internally and externally, where they experience feelings of anxiety, unbelonging and loneliness. In most cases, they strive to reconstruct their own identities and their past through memories. The purpose of this paper is to examine Syrian novelist Shahla Ujayli's female protagonists' experiences of displacement as a result of the Syrian civil war in A sky so close to us (2015 [2019]) and Summer with the enemy (2018 [2021]). It focuses on two female characters, Joumane Badran and Lamees, who live in Amman, Jordan, and Cologne, Germany, respectively. In presenting their feelings of dislocation and unease to adapt in the host countries, Ujayli vividly portrays their attachments to their native Syrian city of Raqqa, which was sadly destroyed during the war. Eventually, in each narrative, the protagonist's destroyed house in Raqqa and those of her close kinsfolk emerge as sites over which memories, displacement and adaptation converge. Thus, by narrating the history of specific houses in Raqqa, both female protagonists remain connected to their roots, and hence, they resist alienation, loss and dislocation. In this sense, this paper argues that in Ujayli's novels, houses, even if they are destroyed, are not just spaces that people live in, but they are symbols of a home that the two protagonists carry in their memories as they navigate (un)familiar diasporic spaces.

Keywords: Shahla Ujayli, civil war, displacement, memories, home

The ancient walls surrounding the old city of Raqqa contain endless stories. The houses support each other. One house built atop another, and little rooms are built randomly on rooftops, making you feel that you're about to fall. They're often unlicensed and unsafe, but standing (…) The balconies and doors are encircled by mimosa trees, purple and red rose (…) *Most of the houses aren't fancy but they overflow with familiarity*. *You feel that every house is your own* (Ujayli, 2021, pp. 152-3)

And so, reminisces Lamees, Ujayli's protagonist in *Summer with the enemy*, from Cologne, Germany, which is around 3,000 km away from her native hometown of Raqqa, Syria. As the above epigraph clearly shows, the historic Syrian city of Raqqa occupies an important space in Syrian novelist Shahla Ujayli's narratives where the unique architecture of some centuries-old Syrian houses is minutely described. Although these houses are randomly built atop of each other, they are familiar to the city's citizens. Ujayli's protagonist, Lamees, highlights the modesty of the houses, as they evoke a sense of belonging, comfort and closeness. In fact, Raqqa had been in news headlines during the 2010s when extremist factions took control of the city and declared it as their

capital city. The citizens of Raqqa have struggled with different experiences and challenges during the civil war, and many of them were ultimately forced to flee the ongoing ferocious armed clashes.

In 2011, peaceful demonstrations erupted in various Syrian cities in the wake of the "Arab Spring" that swept over other Arab countries. The Syrian regime resorted to excessive force and repression to quell these protests. Eventually, the country was embroiled in a civil war that witnessed regional and international interventions and the emergence of extremist militant groups like Daesh. The war continued, though with varying degrees of armed conflicts, until December 8th, 2024 when Assad's regime was ousted by armed rebel forces headed by Ahmed al-Sharaa's the Islamist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Syrian and Arab novelists have depicted how the nation's civil war has everlasting consequences on Syrian people. Contemporary Arab diasporic literature, therefore, emerged as a medium to represent the displacement of Arab individuals from their homeland, highlighting several themes such as the feeling of exile, alienation, and identity crisis (Aladylah, 2026, p. 3). Khaled Khalifa, Zoulfa Katouh, Rabih Alameddine, Layla AlAmmar and Omar El Akkad have published novels portraying the suffering of Syrian people as victims of lethal attacks inside the country or as refugees who must navigate perilous border crossings. For instance, Alameddine's The wrong end of the telescope (2021) "portrays the dilemma of [Syrian] refugee children who attempt to cross the Mediterranean in search of better living conditions" (Abu Amrieh, 2024, p. 14). Similarly, in What strange paradise (2021) El Akkad represents the Mediterranean as a cemetery for Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, and irregular migrants (Alshwike & Abu Amrieh, 2026). El Akkad's novel "mimic[s] the horrors and struggles of navigating the Mediterranean en route to Fortress Europe" and "critiques the systemic indifference perpetrated by Western nations whose policies prioritize border security over human lives" (Alshwike & Abu Amrieh, 2026).

Alameddine's and El Akkad's novels also portray the hardships that Syrian immigrants face in case they successfully enter Europe. Quite often, displaced characters rely on their memories to represent their destroyed houses and their native cities. Ujayli depicts Syrian women's involuntary migration to other countries as a consequence of the Syrian civil war; they usually find it hard to perceive the new cities as a home since they grapple with feelings of uprootedness, unbelonging and homelessness. Specifically, in A sky so close to us (2015 [2019]) and Summer with the enemy (2018 [2021]), Ujayli's protagonists, Joumane Badran and Lamees, respectively, bank on their memories to reconstruct the landscape of their native city of Raqqa and their destroyed houses as they navigate various (in)hospitable diasporic spaces. Hence, this research investigates how displacement intertwines with the two female protagonists' memories of their city's urban landscape, history and cultural heritage. In particular, we argue that in Ujayli's novels, houses are repositories of the two protagonists' memories and identities as they navigate their diasporic existence in Jordan and Germany.

Several scholars have examined the theme of displacement and memory in contemporary Arabic fiction. Al-Salibi (2022) explains that contemporary Arab authors have crafted fictional narratives on Palestinian, Syrian, and Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers. She argues that the colonization "of Palestine in 1948, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Syrian civil war in 2011 were the conditions of possibility for these movements of displacement" (Al-Salibi, 2022, p. 8). Therefore, these novels delve into themes such as displacement, belonging and identity. More importantly, Syrian diasporic authors investigate the experiences of displacement among Syrians. Alatrash and Abed Alsamad (2020) contend that Syrian literature describes current political issues and characters' "longing for the return to a homeland" (p. 4). Hence, Syrian literature functions as an influential medium that depicts displaced characters' recollections of their homeland.

Raqqa is a city located in northern Syria, particularly on the north bank of the Euphrates River. The history of the city dates back to the third millennium BCE, during the Bronze Age. It is renowned for its prosperity under the reign of Abbasid Caliph Haroun Al Rashid (786- 809) (Al Khabour, 2021, pp. 183-5). Cunliffe et al. (2014) argue that Raqqa "is particularly important as an eighth-century Islamic capital. It is an exceptional site (…) with some of the most significant urban architectural and decorative achievements of the first decades during the Abbasid Caliphate reign" (p. 133). In this period, the architecture of Raqqa was under an Iraqi influence, which was in turn influenced by Iranian one. Robert Hillenbrand (1985) writes: "the buildings in and around Raqqa could be interpreted as the westernmost extension of Iranian architectural modes in the Arab world" (p. 21). Following the Mongol invasion (1259-1265), the city was abandoned for six centuries. The Ottoman Empire attempted to reconstruct the city and reestablish life throughout the nineteenth century, thereby creating modern Raqqa. The twentieth century witnessed the influx of a significant number of refugees into Raqqa from Turkey and Iraq (Al Khabour, 2021, p. 186). During the second half of this century, Raqqa "consists of the remnants of classical and Islamic cities surrounded and overbuilt by extensive modern urban development" (Challis et al. 2004, p. 141). Hence, Raqqa contains archeological sites, which are surrounded by modern houses and landscape.

During Syria's civil war, the government lost control over the city. Raqqa subsequently became the capital of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This new regime significantly shaped not only the citizens' lives and

rights but it also impinged on their 'cultural heritage' (Al Khabour, 2021, p. 191). Abdulkarim (2013) writes, "a lot of old Syrian cities have been subject to damage and destruction, and some castles and archeological buildings that are significant, not only in the history of Syria but also in the history of mankind, have been affected, as well" (p. 9). In short, several historic and archeological sites were bombed and destroyed. Specifically, archeological sites, museums, and monuments in Raqqa, including Abbasid Mosque, Raqqa walls, and Shrine of Ouesis al-Qarni, were either destroyed or looted.

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACH

This research paper provides a textual analysis of Shahla Ujayli's novels, focusing on selected themes which are displacement, memories, home and diaspora. It draws on Brah Avtar's, Gaston Bachelard's, Robert T. Tally's, Eric Prieto, and S. P. Moslund's works on space theory as well as Bill Brown's and Sara Ahmad's object theory. In *A sky so close* to *us* and *Summer with the enemy*, Shahla Ujayli represents the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and its damaging consequences on Syrian civilians, particularly women. At the heart of Ujayli's depictions of her protagonists' feelings of loss and displacement is the memories of the houses they grew up in and which were destroyed during the civil war. Hence, as Abu Amrieh and Shalabi (2025) succinctly put it, a lost or destroyed family house usually haunts a displaced character's memories, "becom[ing] a central motif (…) that stands for loss and dislocation" (p. 2). Thus, in *A sky so close to us* and *Summer with the enemy*, Ujayli portrays the destroyed family houses in Raqqa as sites over which displacement and memories converge. In other words, as a diasporic author, Ujayli depicts how memories of destroyed houses entwine with displacement, resulting in each protagonist's painful and complicated process of adaptation in the host country. Her narratives describe the protagonists' diverse journeys. As Brah (1996) comments on diasporic experiences, displaced people's "multiple journeys may configure into one journey via the confluence of narratives as it is lived and relived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory" (p. 180). Therefore, one may argue that the female protagonists in Ujayli's novels depend on their memories of the houses they grew up in Raqqa to navigate their diasporic spaces with varying degrees of success.

In fact, space and geography are crucial elements in numerous contemporary narratives. In this context, Prieto (2011) argues that attention must be directed toward the "referential force of literature," which refers to "the ability of the fictive imagination to interact with and meaningfully shape the world in which we live" (p. 20). This reveals that literature implicitly interacts with the real world. Postmodern literature does not only explore space and place but also shape the reader's imagination of humans' connection to space. Literature significantly represents "spatial and geographical formations" that are not challenging to address in other disciplines, including social sciences (p. 14). Indeed, Ujayli's novels is a good case in point because her female characters recall their parents' houses and landscape in Raqqa.

In *The poetics of space* (1969), Gaston Bachelard examines an individual's relationship with his lost house, as he can never forget it (p. 56). This person has special relationship with his inhabited house since he recollects his childhood memories to describe it. In fact, the lost house symbolizes "happiness" and allows him to relive the "memories of protection" (pp. 5-6). This shows that he remembers his childhood home since he possesses nice memories. More significantly, he relies on his memories to offer a positive and beautiful description of the house. In this context, Bachelard writes, "For our house is our corner of the world… it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world. If we look at it intimately, the humblest dwelling has beauty" (p. 4). An individual describes his first inhabited house since he considers it a beautiful home and world. In this sense, Bachelard also highlights the significance of the house for an individual, which manifests in protecting an individual's memories and allowing him to dream. Through daydreaming, a person participates in its "warmth," protection and "original features of the house" (pp. 7-8). This research relies on Bachelard's *The poetics of space* because the female protagonists recollect their memories of their lost Syrian houses in the host country.

Several contemporary scholars investigate the intricate relationship between an individual and an object. In "Thing Theory," Brown (2001) examines an individual's relationship with things. Brown was influenced by Martin Heidegger's ideas on objects and things. Heidegger (1971) argues that an object transforms into a thing once it becomes self-reliant and autonomous (p. 164). According to Brown, this happens when an object exceeds its physicality and it is called by another name. In this sense, Brown (2001) writes:

> *You could imagine things […] as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects - their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects) (p. 5).*

From the passage, an object becomes a thing when an individual has either a subjective feeling or a "metaphysical presence" towards this object. Brown also focuses on the notion of time to highlight the essence and excess of things. An object can transform into a thing when a human being develops a special connection

with it. Thing theory, therefore, discusses the close relationship between humans and objects. Thing theory helps us understand the intricate relationship between the Syrian protagonists and pieces of furniture in the houses that they left behind. In addition, our discussion will draw upon Sara Ahmed's "Happy Objects" which will be illustrated within the analysis.

Consequently, this research paper contributes to both feminist studies and space theory, as it attempts to demonstrate the detrimental effects of displacement on Syrian characters, Joumane Badran and Lamees. It investigates the significance of inhabited houses and their objects for these female characters since they heavily rely on their memories of home, Raqqa. It also highlights how these memories enable them navigate their diasporic spaces. Overall, this study unveils the importance of contemporary Arabic literature in representing people's relationships with space and houses.

The Badrans' house, diasporic spaces and Joumane's memories in a sky so close to us

A sky so close to us depicts the life of Joumane Badran, a Syrian intellectual residing in Amman, Jordan. Joumane is in her early thirties, possesses a PhD in cultural anthropology, and is employed by a Dutch humanitarian organization (Ujayli, 2019, p. 15). Joumane introduces herself for the first time while she is sitting in the transit lounge waiting to board her Amman-bound flight. She feels lucky because she is one of the Syrians who could have the opportunity to live abroad. Joumane has experienced an involuntary displacement due to the civil war; she writes, "I'm only here because I fled when academics working in Aleppo started being directly targeted in the war" (p. 17). In other words, Joumane escapes Syria once Daesh members started murdering intellectuals. This highlights her experience of involuntary displacement, as she resides in Amman without her family because her father has decided to remain in Syria. Because of her displacement, Joumane recalls her past experiences in Syria through flashbacks, especially Raqqa and her parents' house. These memories help her navigate her diasporic space in the host country, Jordan.

In Jordan, Joumane experiences a sense of loneliness because of the absence of family relatives and friends. In *The location of culture*, Bhabha (1994) argues that a displaced person is currently in a 'moment of transit' where space and time intersect, resulting in intricate representations of "difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (p. 1). A displaced person, Bhabha affirms, grapples with a sense of confusion, a disturbed direction, and restlessness as he is caught between two places (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). In the novel, Joumane meets Nasser al-Amireh, an Arab-American of Palestinian-Syrian origins, in her flight to Amman. While Joumane feels lonely and helpless, Nasser considers loneliness to be a normal feeling, as he has been dealing with displacement since his childhood due to his Palestinian-Syrian background. She says, "I am a foreigner and all alone (…) I don't know what will happen to me between one day and the next. Will I see my family again or will I lose them forever?" (Ujayli, 2019, p. 95). Joumane feels lonely because she lives alone without her family relatives and friends. Hence, she considers herself a "foreigner" because she feels stuck between two different countries, Syria and Jordan, and fails to belong to both at the same time mainly because her memories are "still fresh" (p. 94). This suggests that (un)wanted displacement deeply affects her since she cannot overcome her exile, feeling of loss, and in-betweenness. This explains her constant memories of Raqqa.

In Amman, Joumane is aware that Daesh is destroying the houses in Raqqa. As the Syrian armed forces retreated, the Free Army, Nusra Front, Islamic state and ISIS took over Raqqa. Joumane alludes to the continuous bombardments in Raqqa throughout the months, leading to massive devastation. In this vein, Tally (2011) explains that the primary objective of a literary text is to "reflect the world around us," "shape our understanding of it" and "inflect the history of the places in question in a reciprocal relationship akin to a positive feedback loop" (p. 3). This indicates that the purpose of fiction is not only to depict and explain the connection of humans to their places, but also convey the history of particular places. Joumane decries the destruction of Raqqa. She ruefully ponders: "You could no longer distinguish the inside of buildings from outside because everything was being destroyed" (Ujayli, 2019, p. 276). As Daesh demolished numerous houses, the citizens of Raqqa endured daily hardships and sufferings. Ujayli depicts how the Badrans "packed up some things and left the house" (p. 247). Eventually, the extremists have entirely demolished the house. Joumane writes: "They left our house, but only after causing tremendous destruction (p. 247). The loss of Joumane's family's house triggers her memories of Raqqa, especially its sky, her family's history, and their house.

The first time that Joumane makes reference to the sky being so close to her is in Zaatari camp in Jordan. In particular, she recalls an incident from her childhood with her sisters. She reminisces: "Once, we were lying on the roof of our house in Raqqa on one of those summer nights when the sky felt so close" (p. 120). The roof symbolizes her childhood experiences and stories with her sisters in Raqqa. Hence, it is the only spot in the house where Joumane can experience sisterly affection and enjoy her time. Therefore, she perceives the sky as being in close proximity to her. As a displaced individual, she imagines the same sky in Amman to alleviate her sense of alienation and liminality.

Elsewhere, Joumane feels annoyed by animals' noises in her garden in Amman and she looks at the sky, re-creating Raqqa's sky in an attempt to feel more secure and calm. In this context, Moslund (2011) argues that literature tackles individuals' and societies' experiences of displacement and their relationship with place. A place can be accessed through the characters' memories since it can be "remembered" (p. 30). Moslund (2011) argues: "A literature of any place also carries the traces and memories of other places in the depths of its language" (p. 36). In the same context, Bachelard (1964) explains that a person relies on daydreaming to relive his past space and house (p. 6). In the novel, Joumane writes, "I escape into the sky, which is more familiar to my eyes. *I've stared at this sky so much, it felt so close*- its stars were sparkling pieces of candy that I could reach if only I could stretch my arms far enough. *It was the same sky that was above our house*" (emphasis added, Ujayli, 2019, p. 74). She looks for the same sky since it evokes memories of home. It also evokes her wonderful memories with her siblings and parents before the outbreak of the civil war. Joumane refers to the sky again in the Zaatari camp: "Despite my unfamiliar location on the ground, *the sky looked very familiar*. I could see the heavens… *It looked exactly like the sky in Raqqa* before a storm, or even after one on those nights, we'd come home after a cousin's wedding" (emphasis added, pp.114-5). She likes the sky for its resemblance to that of Raqqa. Apparently, Joumane's childhood memories of the of sky on the rooftop of her parents' house make her even more attached to the house itself, a feeling that she carries with her wherever she travels.

Due to her displacement and feeling of loneliness, Joumane often recalls her parents' house in detail. In *The poetics of space* (1969), Bachelard asserts that a house is not a geometrical space since it was inhabited by humans. He underlines the individual's relationship with a lost house. Bachelard (1969) argues that "the lost houses that were lost forever continue to live on in us; that they insist in us in order to live again, as though they expected us to give them a supplement of living" (p. 56). Put differently, a person recalls his past memories of the lost house so as to be able to continue his life and not to feel overwhelmed. In the novel, Joumane frequently recalls her parents' lost house. She cannot forget the house because of its remarkable beauty. She meditates: "The way the house looked from the outside did not betray the luxury inside, which was consistent with my father's architectural vision to make it harmonious with the simple houses of our family and other neighbors in the area" (Ujayli, 2019, p. 63). As this quotation shows, Joumane loved her parents' house because it looked harmonious. Therefore, she relies on her memories and imaginations to recall every detail of her parents' house.

Joumane remembers her father's construction of the house during her childhood. Joumane's father, Suhayl Badran, is an architect with dual Master's degrees obtained in the US A who returned in the 1970s to Raqqa to actively participate in many projects, following Ralph Waldo Emerson's steps and the American Dream. He built his house, by renovating a part that was originally built over one hundred and fifty years ago. Joumane writes: "Our house soon had two wings. The Eastern wing was antique, built out of old-style bricks and restored as if it were a building from the eighteenth century that had only yesterday dusted itself off… The West wing was modern" (pp. 60-1). Joumane minutely recollects the story of Suhayl's construction of the luxurious house. She refers to the history of the house because it has a unique architectural design; she particularly admires her father's ability to blend Eastern and Western architectural designs. In this sense, Suhayl "kept the identity of things" while modifying the other aspects to align with their inner being (p. 60). Joumane's statement suggests that her family's house has been decorated with Syrian items, since Suhayl prioritizes preserving Syrian cultural identity. With the help of his wife, he meticulously picked valuable equipment for their house (p. 61). Joumane's description of the house highlights its hybrid nature since Eastern and Western designs harmoniously meet. This reveals that Joumane does not forget her parents' lost house no matter how far she is from Raqqa. These memories make Joumane think of herself as having a hybrid identity, and hence, she relishes the idea of adapting to the diasporic spaces of Amman.

Joumane describes the Eastern wing and refers to its Syrian antique architecture. She depicts the ceilings, which "were dotted with Abbasid-style domes and vaults" (p. 61). This demonstrates that Eastern architecture has a historical lineage going back to several centuries, especially Abbasid period. This block comprises three separate parts, including an office, a reception hall and a dining room. Suhayl's Eastern side highlights the exquisite Syrian design and architecture, revealing his deep appreciation for Syrian architecture. In this Eastern wing, the Badrans can have family gatherings and guests where stories can be told and shared. Significantly, the Eastern wing overlooks a beautiful yard "blooming with flowers and lemon and citron trees planted around a swimming pool with a blue granite bottom" (p. 61). Put differently, Suhayl focuses on a green space while reconstructing his house, a method that is prevalent in Syrian culture. The yard also overlooks a swimming pool, which is constructed using granite to enhance the aesthetic value of the eastern front of his house. Consequently, Joumane recalls the Eastern bloc while being in Amman. This unveils that she values the house's historical lineage and beauty because its architectural design might entail a notion of family, community, love, warmth and collective experiences. As a displaced person, she recalls this wing because she misses the house and the concomitant sense of community. This is mainly because she does not have family relatives and Syrian

friends in the host country. Hence, the feeling of loneliness triggers her memories of home and a sense of community.

According to "Archive of modern architecture in Syria," a website dedicated to documenting the development of Syrian architecture:

> *The architectural scene in Syria underwent a profound transformation around the turn of the twentieth century, marked by the emergence of modern thought against a backdrop of shifting political and social dynamics, most notable in the rise of a national identity that accompanied the end of the Ottoman period. This transformation came parallel to the urban expansion of Syrian cities away from their historical cores, causing the surfacing of novel urban functions that brought forth new architectural typologies, materials, and construction methods, which would shape the architectural practice and the urban settings of Syrian cities. (https://www.amasyria.com/en/about/)*

In the novel, the reader is informed that the Western wing of the Badrans' house embodies Western architecture. This wing is modern and consists of two floors and several bedrooms. Joumane writes: "The bedrooms were divided between two floors, with a little inner staircase connecting them. It went from the attic all the way down to the main door of the house, which opened onto a simple outer garden with jasmine, white jasmine, basil, and red roses" (Ujayli, 2019, p. 61). This suggests that Suhayl's primary objective is to introduce modern architecture in Raqqa during the 1970s embodied by the Western wing. The different rooms might refer to characters' private lives, personal stories, family problems or individualism. The quote also highlights the presence of an exterior garden, which is a Western conception because traditional Syrian houses have inner gardens. The incorporation of an exterior garden reflects Suhayl's wish to introduce Western architectural design in Syrian houses. Joumane reflects on the beauty of the destroyed house, particularly the Western wing, reminiscing on her personal experiences of happy moments; therefore, she is unable to forget her lived experiences in the house where she spent most of her life.

Interior design plays a major role in the Badrans' house. According to Bachelard, a person relies on his memory and imagination to create house images. Imagination is significant since its main objective is to increase the 'value' of the inhabited house (Bachelard, 1969, p. 3). More importantly, one or various objects in a house have value for an individual, as they not only live within the individual's consciousness but also reside within the body. As Ahmed (2010) explains, "We can be happily affected in the present of an encounter; you are affected positively by something, even if that something does not present itself as an object of consciousness" (p. 31). Put differently, an object can exert a positive impact on an individual, as he experiences both happiness and satisfaction when nearby. She adds (2010): "To be affected 'in a good way' involves an orientation towards something being good" (p. 32). In the novel, Joumane vividly describes the interior design of the Eastern wing:

> *The reception halls were decorated in the Louis XV style, the living rooms copied Harrods, and everything was crafted by the best-known furniture maker in Aleppo, Leon Massabki. The chandeliers in the reception halls were made from pure crystal that Baba had brought with him from Austria (Ujayli, 2019, p. 61)*

Just like the architectural design of the house, the interior design combines Western and Eastern styles. She clearly recalls the expensive equipment because of her appreciation of interior design. Hence, remembering the interior design has a positive and soothing impact on Joumane as she navigates the diasporic spaces of Amman. Put differently, Joumane's positive recollections of interior design enable her to undergo a journey of self-discovery in an attempt to overcome her feelings of displacement and in-betweenness in the host country.

Joumane describes the interior design of the Western wing and focuses on various equipment bought from different parts of the world. The Badrans relied on bronze lamps, 'three were antique oil lamps' that were found in their grandfather's basement (p. 61). Moreover, they bought several Persian carpets for their elegance and luxury. They may have chosen Persian carpets to reflect the history and importance of Eastern culture and design, thereby enhancing the significance of Western architecture. Reflecting on the interior décor of their house reveals that Joumane is affected by the different equipment because of their beauty, uniqueness, and value. Therefore, she highlights the hybrid nature of her parents' house, emphasizing Suhayl's primary role in mediating between Eastern and Western architectural styles. In a way, recalling these minute details and highlighting the hybrid nature of the Badrans' house underline Ujayli's position on acculturation and cultural adaptation as her protagonist seeks to strike a balance between her past and presence, and belonging and uprootedness. In other words, Joumane's recollections of the fine harmony between Eastern and Western interior designs in her parents' house enable her to transcend her present feelings of alienation and estrangement, ultimately reconciling contradictory and clashing elements in her life.

The Badrans bought several objects from their travels to different European countries, including Poland, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia. In "Happy objects", Ahmed (2010) explains that one or more objects can derive a sense of happiness within an individual. Ahmed (2010) conceptualizes happiness as 'a happening,' arguing that the person can be either influenced by an object or deliberately "happy about" it (p. 29). In this context, the experience of happiness is associated with 'what happens' to the individual when he sees or touches the object (p. 30). The expression 'what happens' is deeply connected to a feeling of pleasure, as the object can affect the

individual. In the novel, Joumane writes: "The vases, cups, and ashtrays made of silver, white, or colored crystal were carefully arranged on the side boards and tables and in the windows" (Ujayli, 2019, p. 62). She adds, "Each had its own specific memory" (p. 63). This example unveils that Western interior design is carefully selected to display how Western and Eastern cultures can be harmoniously joined. Furthermore, Suhayl's purchase of several paintings by Arab artists reflects the significant value that Arab art occupies in the Badrans' house. Therefore, Joumane fondly recalls the different objects in the Badrans' house because she is affected by their uniqueness. This unveils that Joumane's feeling of happiness is associated with her positive memories and recollections of the selected objects. In other words, her memories of her family's destroyed house help her undergo a journey of self-discovery and overcome feelings of loneliness, uprootedness, and identity crisis. To do so, Joumane works for a Dutch humanitarian organization to represent the voices of Arab refugees residing in the Zaatari camps in her research papers. She also strives to overcome her emotions and fears following her diagnosis with lymphoma cancer.

Before the destruction of the Badrans' house, Joumane is diagnosed with lymphoma cancer in Amman and must undergo treatment without the presence of her family members. Assisted by Nasser al-Amireh and Haniyah Thabit, she learns how to cope and overcome her disease (Chabane Chaouch, 2022, p. 5356). Joumane undergoes a journey of self-discovery, focusing on the processes of healing and embracing exile. By the end of the novel, she transforms into an exilic intellectual as she finally accepts her displacement and enjoys her life (p. 2537). From the windows of the hospital, she observes the same sky of Raqqa. In the closing lines of the novel, she says, "The sky here is close, so close. You can reach it with no rope, and no ladder" (Ujayli, 2019, p. 296). This insinuates that Joumane imagines the same sky that she once saw while on the rooftop of her family's house in Raqqa, and hence, her memories of her family's house have helped her navigate unfamiliar diasporic spaces and minimize her sense of unbelonging, uprootedness and alienation. Put differently, the experiences of lymphoma cancer and friendship have a positive influence on Joumane, enabling her to navigate feelings of displacement, loneliness and identity crisis. She no longer thinks of her previous bad memories of home, Raqqa and family relatives. She embraces her new lifestyle in Amman by attending in Haniyah Thabit's dance parties, socializing with her new Arab acquaintances, and evolving into a Saidian exilic intellectual. These examples suggest that she has achieved a sense of affiliation.

Lamees's contrapuntal vision, Nana Karma's house and navigating diasporic spaces in summer with the enemy

Summer with the enemy is set during the first three days of Lamees's arrival in Cologne, Germany, as an immigrant. Since she belonged to a wealthy Syrian family, Lamees sought to enter Germany legally through the help of her family's acquaintances, Nicholas and Carmen. Indeed, they have helped her register at university to study German language to guarantee a legal status for her. In fact, she lost her entire family before moving to Cologne, and her only acquaintances are Nicholas, Carmen and Abboud, her childhood friend. As she walks in the city, she encounters numerous refugees, whom she refers to as foreigners. According to Richard Lewis, an immigrant faces diverse challenges, including identity crisis, belonging, and the process of integration. He grapples with a feeling of belonging, which is defined as the place in which individuals feel secure, acknowledged, and accepted (Lewis, 2006, p. 9). Lamees states, "I had decided to call the refugees *foreigners*" (emphasis added, Ujayli, 2021, p. 8). Lamees considers them as "foreigners" because they do not possess German citizenship and, she assumes, they have not entered Germany legally, like her. As a descendant of a wealthy Syrian family who suddenly finds herself displaced and underprivileged, Lamees seeks to boost her ego by comparing herself to refugees and asylum seekers in a bid to distinguish herself and cope with her own liminality and marginalization. She asserts: "Travel is neither a privilege nor a pleasure in the world of refugees and asylum seekers, but rather a stigma and dishonor. Germany is full of Syrians who arrived in a variety of ways" (Ujayli, 2021, pp. 37-8). This example illustrates that Syrians experienced involuntary displacement to Germany, whether through legal or illegal means. Thus, they perceive displacement as a misfortune due to their various hardships and struggles they encounter. Because of their feelings of stigma and dishonor, Lamees draws on her memories in Raqqa before and after the extremist factions invaded it.

Lamees's initial difficulty is to adapt in the host country, Germany. She consistently compares Cologne to Raqqa during her visit. Lamees describes her relationship with Cologne. She thinks that Cologne

> *grants them [strangers] a modicum of confidence and safety. It's like a child far from home looking at their auntie and seeking their mother's face. Difference engenders many regrets; how long will I keep making comparisons? Comparisons are exhausting and continually remind foreigners of their foreignness. I believe that we will begin to fit in when we stop making comparisons between our homeland and our place of refuge. (p. 36*)

In the above excerpt, Lamees experiences a state of disbelief and shock, as she grapples with her new status. Therefore, she compares Aleppo with Cologne because she perceives herself a foreigner. She experiences a sense of being "in-between" and grapples with an identity crisis in this unfamiliar space. This suggests that she finds it

hard to reconcile with her experience of forced displacement to save her life. Lamees believes that she has to learn the language, culture, history, and streets in order to assimilate.

In an attempt to integrate into society, Lamees visits the Cathedral which is located at the heart of the Rhine to view the shrine of the three kings: Magi Balthazar, Melchior, and Caspar. It is not a coincidence that Ujayli mentions these three kings because historically they are travelers who left their homelands in search of meeting the newly born Jesus. Like Lamees herself, they crossed borders. Therefore, Lamees's visit is spiritual rather than religious, as she aims to transcend her feeling of uprootedness and unbelonging. She relates: "In order for a strange city not to swallow you up, *you have to seize it by its soul*. Cologne's soul is its Cathedral" (emphasis added, p. 40). Put differently, Lamees has chosen the appropriate site to build a solid connection with the city. Capturing the city's true spirit enables her to easily settle in the host country. Consequently, Lamees seriously attempts to integrate from the beginning of the novel, thinking of Cologne as her new home since she lost her family members in Syria.

In her first three days in Cologne, Lamees cannot forget her traumatic experiences following the extremist groups' takeover of Raqqa. Daesh has effortlessly taken possession of Syrian citizens' houses, knowing that these inhabitants cannot complain. Then, they forced native residents to leave the city. After midnight, Syrian Democratic Forces, led by the Kurdish troops, reached Lamees's neighborhood and ordered the residents to leave Raqqa. Lamees writes,

> *After midnight we heard that the Kurds has reached the outskirts of the city, ten miles from our house (…) One of the QSD troops who was inside our neighborhood asked us all to leave, as a confrontation between Daesh, QSD, and the coalition was imminent. They don't care if you stay or leave. (p. 176)*

The QSD ordered the citizens of Raqqa to leave the area, warning that those who decide to remain in Raqqa are not guaranteed any form of protection. Therefore, the citizens sought refuge in two different houses: Auntie Maria's and Nana Karma's. After the warning, the confrontation between the parties caused the devastation of the neighborhood, including the destruction of schools, houses and hospitals. This indicates that these extremist groups are responsible for the destruction of Raqqa, and the displacement and the deaths of its inhabitants. Consequently, Lamees clearly highlights the detrimental and enduring effects left by the extremist factions on Raqqa and its inhabitants.

At midnight, members of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) returned to ask the citizens of Raqqa to leave owing to their continuous problems with Daesh members. Thus, the inhabitants of Raqqa assemble in the neighborhood and the SDF members accompany the citizens to the borders of the city due to their expertise in navigating the routes. Lamees reminisces: "No one spoke. *No one bade the city farewell or even stole a last look* as its decaying corpse. *No one wanted to remember anything, suffer, grieve, or even think about it*" (emphasis added, p. 181). Evidently, the citizens of Raqqa are unwilling to recall any memories of their city, driven by feelings of despair and hopelessness. This reflects their desire to find a secure refuge where they can survive.

In Cologne, Lamees is haunted by the traumatic events she experienced in Raqqa. In *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative and history*, Caruth (1996) explains that a person is traumatized because of one or several violent experiences (p. 181). Even though Lamees and her mother, Najwa, wanted to depart from Raqqa, the absence of a male guardian made things complicated. She recalls, "I didn't want to die under the bombs. I wanted to escape" (Ujayli, 2021, p. 274). This incident reveals that women face significant discrimination from the different extremist factions. In fact, Lamees undergoes her journey alone after the loss of her mother, Najwa. She reminisces: "I found my mother lying dead under the willow trees" (p. 185). She feels shocked over the dismemberment of her mother's body. While the remaining civilians have used the boat to flee Raqqa, Lamees is unable to abandon Najwa's corpse on the shore. After Najwa's burial, Lamees attempts to legally travel to Germany. She relies on her mother's German friends, Nicholas and Carmen, to flee Syria and ensure that she legally lives in Germany (p. 276). These experiences shape Lamees's memories of home because she is traumatized during the civil war. Hence, she recalls her family's history and some houses of Raqqa.

Despite her willingness to forget her past, Lamees cannot forget her traumatic memories in Syria. Just like Joumane in *A sky so close to us*, Lamees's memories of home are intricately linked to the house in which she grew up, that is the house of her maternal parents Agha Ibrahim and Nana Karma. In fact, Agha Ibrahim was a wealthy landlord who possessed acres of lands and a luxurious house. Lamees reminisces: "He owned extensive lands and orchards along the river, unparalleled by any others, except two families in the Euphrates families" (p. 52). Like various wealthy individuals, he used to collect money and travel to other places such as Aleppo, Damascus, Beirut, Alexandria and Paris. Furthermore, he visited luxurious hotels such as Saint-George hotel in Beirut. This reveals that Lamees's grandparents are wealthy Syrians from Raqqa. She recalls her grandparents' wealth because she is unable to believe what happened to Raqqa and its citizens during the Syrian civil war.

Lamees's grandparents owned a beautiful house located one street away from Lamees's parents' house. Lamees spent long spells of her childhood at her grandmother Nana Karma's house because of the continued disputes between her parents. In "Home and memory," Femke Stock explains that an individual remembers his

memories of home in diaspora due to its temporal and spatial distance. Stock (2010) argues that "home memories both inform and are informed by the positions individuals and groups occupy in the here and now" (p. 25). In other words, a person continuously recalls his home because of his various experiences in the present. Lamees recalls her grandparents' house because she considers it home. She also regards her grandparents' house as beautiful, as it "was the nicest house in the city" (Ujayli, 2021, p. 27). As wealthy landowners, Lamees's grandparents had a strong interest in architecture, resulting in the construction of luxurious houses. It is no coincidence that Lamees' grandparents' house occupies a central place in her memories of home as she struggles to settle in Cologne. Hence, one may convincingly argue that her recollections of her grandparents' house, including its exterior architecture, interior designs, and furniture, help her navigate unfamiliar diasporic spaces in Cologne. The protagonist recalls images of her grandparents' house because she lives in the host country, Germany. Simply put, the house in which she grew up is significant as it shapes her world views and identity in Germany.

In her recollections, Lamees offers a detailed description of the house and its two floors. Prieto (2011) explains that the various portrayals of space are not necessarily objective, as authors may draw upon personal experiences. Prieto (2011) highlights the "subjective dimension of place, which gives rise to expressions like 'a sense of place' and has an inherently experiential dimension that has often gone missing from geographical analyses" (p. 15). This means that a person often draws on and foregrounds his subjective experiences of place. Lamees states, "The ground floor had two living rooms, which opened out into each other, a bathroom, and a kitchen leading to a small interior garden" (Ujayli, 2021, p. 27). This floor is an open space designated to gatherings of family and friends. Nana Karma, originally from Bethlehem, regularly invited her Syrian friends to talk about their different experiences and stories. Lamees dedicates much time to this house because she loves these gatherings and enjoys listening to stories. Moreover, she describes the upper floor, as Nana Karma has a special relationship with it. As Prieto (2011) succinctly explains, a narrative "emphasizes the subjective experience of place" (p. 15). In the same vein, Bachelard (1969) argues that "by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms,' we hear to abide within ourselves (…) the house images (…) are in us as much as we in them" (xxxvii). This unveils that a person has a special relationship with his inhabited house since he recollects his childhood memories to describe it. Lamees writes, "On the upper floor there was a small lounge with three bedrooms and a bathroom branching off of it" (Ujayli, 2021, p. 27). The upper floor consists of bedrooms because it refers to Nana Karma's hidden personal stories. It may denote the individual experiences, challenges and obstacles that remain unshared with others. In fact, Nana Karma was a dancer in Egypt and did not want the citizens of Raqqa to know her past. She aimed to hide it from her children, Lamees, and friends. As a child, Lamees was not allowed to visit the first floor, which remained locked following Agha Ibrahim's death. From the narrative, one learns that Lamees is her grandfather's only grandchild and was supposed to inherit the house. Lamees's recollections of her grandparents' former house uncover her inability to forget the various experiences she had within the house. Therefore, her memories encompass not only the house itself but also its floors and furnishings, which hold significant importance for Lamees.

Like Joumane, Lamees represents the interior décor of the house, revealing that Syrians do not neglect the interior design. She mostly concentrates on the different changes due to her grandmother's illness. In this context, Ahmed (2010) explains that the various changes in objects over time can 'create different impressions' on individuals (p. 31). In the novel, Lamees argues, "My grandmother's household décor changed after she started suffering from sciatica and then knee pain. She could no longer walk up the stairs so she transformed the downstairs living room, dining room, and guest room" (Ujayli, 2021, p. 27). She also installed both kerosene Aram-brand sobia heater and an electronic water heater. Lamees disapproves the changes because the house lost its 'aristocratic grandeur' (p. 28). This indicates that Lamees loves the previous interior design as it encompasses her nice memories, stories, gatherings, and experiences with Nana Karma. The interior design adds a special value to Lamees's memories, which is why she recalls the details of her grandmother's house clearly. Lamees's memories of her grandmother's house enable her to connect with her present and navigate her diasporic space, mainly by comparing the architectural designs and interior décor of houses in Raqqa to those she sees and enters in Cologne. In this sense, Lamees's contrapuntal envisioning of the past and the present is mediated through her memories of the houses she inhabited in Raqqa.

One of the houses she recalls is that of her childhood friend Abboud Asahd. Lamees recalls her childhood experiences and memories with Abboud. They typically spent the majority of their holidays in the streets of Raqqa or in their families' houses. Doctor Asahd, Abboud's father, is a Syrian individual who studied in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s before settling in Raqqa. At that time, several Syrians married East European women. Lamees offers a brief description of their house due to her fascination with it. She writes, "Their homes were cozy and *displayed a mix of elegance*, *good taste*, *a practicality*. *Everything was in its place* and there was no excess" (emphasis added, p. 14). Consequently, Lamees is captivated by the beauty and organization in these houses. Just like Lamees herself, Abboud has lost his family's house and currently resides in Cologne, where he works as a

chef. Lamees reflects on Ashad's lost house and its belongings because she realizes that both of them have experienced displacement in Cologne. Hence, the sense of displacement prompts the protagonist to recall lost homes.

Lamees does not only remember the previous houses but also her parents' house. According to Bachelard (1964), a person has a special relationship with his inhabited house since he recollects childhood memories to describe it (xxxvii). Lamees briefly recalls her parents' house while being in Carmen's house in Cologne. She writes,

> *My house was more beautiful than hers. It was large, well furnished, and looked out on the Euphrates. When Carmen visited us in Raqqa, she found it an antique masterpiece. It is true that it was just one story tall and wasn't as fancy as my grandmother Karma's house. (Ujayli, 2021, p. 245)*

This quotation shows that Lamees recalls the magnificent architecture and elegance of her own house. This also shows how, as a displaced person, Lamees continues to think contrapuntally by juxtaposing images of the past with those of the present. She cannot help comparing her own house in Raqqa to Carmen's in Cologne. In fact, she cherishes Carmen's description of her house as "an antique masterpiece". Recalling Carmen's words gives Lamees an ego boost that she desperately needs.

This sense of pride and satisfaction is of paramount importance to Lamees who, as a displaced person, resorts to her memories to summon up happy moments in the face of current feelings of defeat and disillusionment. Indeed, she fondly remembers how her mother has selected Tanrus shop and ordered what she wanted to furnish their house. She reflects on her house because of its specific location besides the Euphrates. The house has an expansive garden adorned with a variety of flowers and trees. Furthermore, Lamees loses her house at the beginning of the civil war due to its strategic position. She writes, "Our house's one problem was that it was located at the center of a civil war" (Ujayli, 2021, p. 245). It is true that Lamees recalls her former house, which was demolished by Daesh members, but she does not recall every detail of her house, as she spent most of her childhood in Nana Karma's grand house or playing with Abboud outdoors. Lamees's memories of her parents' house is of great significance as they enable her to overcome her feelings of uprootedness, alienation, and identity crisis in Cologne. These feelings arise from her belief that she is a foreigner in Germany, where she does not have several friends and her proficiency in the German language is minimal.

On her second day in Cologne, Lamees attempts to stop drawing comparisons in order to live a normal life and forget her bad experiences. She tries to live a normal day, as she takes a bath, prepares her coffee and changes her clothing style in Carmen's house. To illustrate, she writes, "I made coffee in her automatic machine. Everything was so easy and convenient. I never needed more than a minute or two to figure out how to use the machines in her house. Such an easy modern life it is" (pp. 189-90). Put differently, Lamees appreciates her new comfortable life since she learns how to use modern machines. She perceives life in the new city as considerably easier due to their superior lifestyle compared to Raqqa. Her efforts uncover her determination to overcome her negative memories and previous traumas. Later on, Lamees and Carmen discuss several topics, including love stories and family relationships. After watching a match, Carmen tackles the issue of integration. Carmen says, "Soccer can help you integrate, like going to university" (p. 209). Therefore, Carmen shows Lamees the importance of acculturation and adaptation. She also introduces Lamees to other individuals, notably Nader, Olga and Gunter, in order to ensure a smooth transition to a new life.

As the above argument shows, Lamees feels the urgent need to quickly and properly settle in her new place of residence in Cologne. In this context, she states, "*Cologne's streets welcomed me with open arms*. I'd never before had the chance to be alone, free as a bird separated from its flock" (emphasis added, p. 234). This unveils that she loves Cologne due to the feeling of freedom it provides. Thus, she started to love her new life because of the presence of her former acquaintances, Carmen, Abboud and Nicholas. In the final pages of the novel, Lamees hopes to eventually overcome her various traumatic experiences of war, loss, displacement, and in-betweenness. She wonders, "Would time really pass and I'd become just like her (…)?" (p. 280). Hence, Lamees, as a new immigrant, cannot overcome her experiences of displacement and loss of home and family within three days. However, her concluding musings and reflections suggest that she may need time to embark on a journey of self-discovery, heal her trauma and be reconciled with her sense of exile. The ending of the novel suggests that Lamees has a positive view of the future.

CONCLUSION

This research paper has analyzed Shahla Ujayli's depictions of involuntary displacement and recollections of home in her novels *A sky so close to us* and *Summer with the enemy*. In both novels, Joumane Badran and Lamees experience compelled displacement from Raqqa as a result of the Syrian civil war. The two novels depict the experiences of two Syrian women who are forced to leave their hometown of Raqqa, but they continue to remember the houses in which they grew up and lived prior to their dislocation. While both of them are descendants of wealthy Syrian families who used to inhabit luxurious houses and enjoy a privileged social life,

they experience displacement differently due to the diverse conditions and circumstances they encounter in their respective host lands. While Joumane resides in Jordan, an Arab and Islamic country that substantially shares Syria's historical and cultural heritages, Lamees finds herself in Cologne, Germany, an entirely different cultural space from that of her native Raqqa. However, as displaced individuals, they heavily draw on their memories to navigate, albeit nervously, their quotidian experiences in Jordan and Germany.

Yet, in their endeavors to carve up new niches for themselves in these diasporic spaces, they are often drawn to think of their families from whom they are separated and unable to reconnect with. Nonetheless, in their narratives of family and home, houses, including exterior and interior designs and furniture, emerge as bridges that connect the past to the present, and eventually, help them (un)easily negotiate feelings of uprootedness, unbelonging and discomfort. Practically, memories of their houses in Raqqa help them feel more secure and rooted since these are the places where their past is safely stored and deposited. The two novels end on positive notes as Joumane becomes an exilic intellectual after a journey of self-discovery, and Lamees feels optimistic about the future and unveils her desire to start a new life that transcends the traumatic experiences of the past. Hence, in both novels, although the two protagonists' houses in Raqqa are destroyed during Syria's civil war, their images remain engraved in Joumane's and Lamees' memories, constantly reminding them of who they are and helping them navigate the unfamiliar diasporic spaces they inhabit.

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This research paper adheres to ethical guidelines, as the contributors worked on the research paper and wrote the intext citations and the references. The research paper presents credible and reliable research findings. Moreover, this study offers a new approach and reading of Shahla Ujayli's Arab diasporic novels.

Competing interests

The contributors confirm that there exist no competing interests.

Author contributions

Sarah Chabane Chaouch was first interested in the representation of houses and objects in Shahla Ujayli's novels. Hence, Yousef Abu Amrieh reframed the argument and suggested the theories since Arab diaspora is his field of interest. While Chabane Chaouch worked on writing the drafts and contributing to the analysis of the novels, Prof. Abu Amrieh reviewed it and made contributions to the argument.

Data availability

In the research process, the contributors relied on several books, book chapters, and articles. Therefore, the findings are available within the article and its references.

Biographical sketch

Sarah Chabane Chaouch is an associate professor who works at Mouloud MAMMERI University of Tizi-Ouzou. She obtained her PhD degree of Philosophy of English Literature from the University of Jordan in 2021. She specializes in ecocriticism in cotemporary British and American fiction. Her fields of interest are ecocriticism, contemporary fiction, and Arab diasporic literature.

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