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## Exploring the Concept of Home through Analysing the Relationship between Place and Identity in Selected works by Suad Amiry

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### Abstract

This paper traces the development of the style and the technique of Palestinian writings that deal with colonialism and applies this development on *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* and *Golda Slept Here* by Suad Amiry. It also aims to explore the notions of loss, exile and displacement and the experience of issuing permits and passing through check points and their role in constructing the relationship between place and identity. Suad Amiry's writings stand out due to her unique way of writing which relies mainly on black comedy and humour to deliver the idea. Her books narrate her self-exploration journey as a Palestinian woman living under occupation and her attempts to maintain a third space in which she can write, live and think.

According to Gramsci, the “starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (324). History, time, memories, culture and places always leave their imprint on one’s identity and to master one’s relationship with the outside world, he/ she may follow these traces and be aware of where he/ she stands in the world. The process of writing always allows multiple critical readings and interpretations of major historical and significant events which occurred in and affected someone’s life. As Leeuwen proposes, writing “places you outside the bonds of times and places which are imposed by ideologies and politics and which deprive you of your freedom of manoeuvre and your freedom of thought’ (207). Leeuwen’s idea implies that writing is considered as a powerful means of resistance against different forms of domination as it endows people with the freedom of expressing their thoughts and opinions. In the case of Palestine, the colonizer never actually left but has rather developed from the Ottomans to the British to the Israelis. This colonialization has a major role in the development of the themes, techniques and style of Palestinian writings.

Palestinian writings took the form of writing back in anger as a form of resistance against the colonizer. These writings cannot totally be considered postcolonial but they rather represent a *Colonial Present*, as indicated by John Gregory in the title of his book, since colonialism never actually ended in Palestine. Ella Shohat also tackles this point in “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial’” in which she explains that the word “post” means “after” and in this case, the Palestinian writings represent what she rather calls “pre-postcolonial” (104). Most of these writings deal with the pre-1948 period, the aftermath of the exodus of the Palestinians in 1948, the destruction of home and land, how it is like to live in colonized Palestine and the effect of exile. They give way for the Palestinians “to reclaim Palestine, to reclaim the bond between people and land” (Habib 83). Habib also illustrates how these writings create a third space of existence which provides multiple definitions to being a Palestinian re-narrating the story of occupation from a new prospective (73). Palestinian writers succeeded in creating a third space or a hyphen in which they can actually belong through writing. It is also a way of remembering what it is like to be home by writing all the memories they have of Palestine or the memories they have heard in the stories of the Nakba generation.

Palestinian writings are not only general accounts about the loss of the land, but recently they have developed and have also become more personal. According to Salma Jayussi “the abundance of personal account literature” is what signifies Palestinian literature nowadays (vii). Most of the Nakba generation usually romanticized the idea of Palestine in their writings and avoided “talking about personal pain” (Amiry, *Golda Slept Here* 10).

Palestinian writings used to deal with the idea of loss and exile but nowadays, these themes are always mixed with the writer's personal account and experience. In most Palestinian diaries and autobiographies, there is always an intertwining between the personal and the political in a historical time frame. Suad Amiry, the Palestinian writer, once stated in an interview:

I realized quickly that we Palestinians never give a name or put a face to the Palestinian Story. We are always obsessed with the collective story. We are obsessed with losing a country. But what does it really mean to lose a country?... What's more powerful: To say, 'I lost my country', or to say, 'I lost my home'... I've found that the power of being personal is something that the Palestinian or Arab culture shies away from, but it's effective. ("A Conversation with Palestinian Author", *IMEU*)

The idea of personalizing the story gives way for readers to relate to the same story in many ways creating a collective memory which in the case of Palestinians a way to eliminate the obsession with the idea of loss.

Suad Amiry is a Palestinian writer who started her career at the age of fifty five. She always describes herself as a writer of mere accident as her first book *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* started as a series of emails sent to her friends in which she used to express her frustration with her mother in law. In the preface of her book, Amiry states that "writing was an attempt to release the tension caused and compounded by Ariel Sharon" and of course her mother in law (x). The book is divided into two parts; part one deals with the daily encounters with Israelis that any Palestinian has to deal with while part two addresses more personal issues between Amiry and her mother-in-law.

It is obvious from the title itself that Amiry's book interweaves the two parts; the political and the personal. She relates the occupation of her country with the occupation of her house by her mother in law in a sarcastic tone. She humorously comments in the introduction on how she may forgive the Israelis for living under a curfew for 42 days but will never forgive them for living with her mother in law for what seemed like 42 years. What connects both parts is the idea of the loss of the land and how Amiry's identity was shaped according to this sense of loss. She actually wrote the second part of the book, which is mainly about living with her mother-in-law before the first part. *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* deals with many themes such as loss, identity, exile, displacement and patriarchy. Amiry weaves these ordeals which resulted from colonialization altogether with the incidents she encounters in her daily life giving a vivid portrait of what it is like to be colonized yet experiencing the normal situations that anyone can encounter.

Humour as a tool of resistance:

Amiry's books "are really about everyday life... about people who want to live" (Khan, "One on One"). What is really distinguished about her is that unlike most Palestinian writers, she deals with the pain and agony of colonialization with humour. That does not mean that she underestimates colonialization or takes it lightly but it can be considered as a way of "revealing the absurdity of occupation and its emotional and material impact on everyday" without being flippant (Sino 32). The Palestinian past is full of pain and agony and the present is unbearable but Amiry succeeded in finding a middle-ground in which she is able to move forward towards the future. She accomplished this by figuring out "how to step out of the frame and observe the senselessness of the moment" which is to her "a valuable defence mechanism against the Israeli occupation" (Amiry, *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* XI). Amiry's style and technique of writing echoes Emile Habibi's *the Secret Life of Saeed: the Pessoptimist* which critiques the colonizer's practices and also highlights Saeed's treason in a sarcastic manner. The fact that Amiry takes after Habibi may render to the fact that he was a close family friend and he was the last one to see her father before he dies as she mentions in *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*.

Amiry's humour is a form of resistance as she depicts the brutal acts of the colonizer with sarcasm. This form of humour can be described as "gallows humour" which "arises in connection with a precarious or dangerous situation" such as occupation (Obrdlik 709). It can also be considered as a courageous act as she mocks the occupation in its face. Humour is a means which empowers her and strengthens her sense of identity as a Palestinian woman dealing with the troubles of colonization. Most of the humorous scenes throughout *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* occur in places which are considered dangerous to Palestinians like airports and check points since permits and IDs are not issued easily. In chapter one, she narrates her experience in the airport and the long process of the security check where she was tired and exhausted yet, she did not let it ruin her sense of humour. When the Israeli soldier asked her "what were you doing in London", she replied: "I went dancing", which made the Israeli soldier lose his temper (8). Her driver Ibrahim came to rescue and was shocked to hear what she said to the officer. Amiry gives another sarcastic note on how "the occupation ruined the spirit of both Israelis and Palestinians" (11). Ibrahim was able to get her out of the situation claiming that "it takes a man to talk to men" (12). Amiry managed to use humour to transform powerlessness to agency because "humour is about risk and privilege; for women and other groups exiled from the centres of power, it can signal the transformation of speechless outrage to persuasive, vocal and joyous audacity" (Barreca 18). She was not afraid of being arrested like Ibrahim and she stepped out from the role of the submissive passive helpless

woman and rather became a powerful one. Humour allowed Amiry to subvert occupation and patriarchal authority.

Amiry took advantage of being a woman in many situations such as when she signed the anti- PLO statement and was not summoned by the Israeli governor. She actually thought that “perhaps being a woman helped” her in not being taken seriously (*Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* 29). In this situation, she also makes fun of and describes herself as “crazy”, “unprincipled” and “unheroic” because she signed the anti- PLO statement despite her family history in the PLO as her sister Anan was a member of the PLO National Council and her father resigned from his job in Jordan in support of the PLO (29). She admits her mistakes with irony which makes her character more realistic. Another triumph was achieved when she went to captain Yossie’s office to reclaim her ID crying and freaking out and at the end, she managed to take it. Amiry narrates how uneasy the situation was for Yossie as maybe “he was capable of handling Palestinian demonstrators, rebels, stabbers, terrorists... but not a crying woman. Not a woman freaking out” (39). She does not shy away from making fun of herself and she even uses self-deprecating humour which reflects that she is far away from being impeccable.

In Zwagerman’s opinion, the masks of comedy and tragedy are inseparable only if humour is considered "as an act of striving for the impossible, of tending toward a brief moment of absolute understanding" (Zwagerman 211). Most of Amiry’s funny remarks always carry the agony resulting from colonization. This was quite apparent when she was thinking about the gift that Rami got her and thought that maybe he stole it as “stealing things from Israelis was one way Palestinians got back at the Israelis for stealing our land and homes” but then she adds “we have got to do much more stealing before we get even” (*Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* 88). Such remarks reveal how close- knit is tragedy and comedy when describing a painful situation.

Perhaps one of the most famous humorous situations in Amiry’s *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* and also related to a dangerous place, Jerusalem checkpoint, is when she took her dog, Nura, to an Israeli vet who issued the terrier a Jerusalem passport that millions of Palestinians would kill for. Amiry made use of this passport when an Israeli officer stopped her at the Jerusalem checkpoint and she handed it to him explaining: “I am the dog’s driver. As you can see, she is from Jerusalem and she cannot possibly drive the car or go to Jerusalem all by herself” (108). The irony in this situation reveals the absurdity of living under occupation where a dog can get a permit but people born to a Palestinian father and mother actually cannot. In

every situation, Amiry manages to find the funny side which in turn arms her against collapsing before the cruel practices of the colonizer. Humour is what helped her go through tough life in Ramallah and to decide willingly to live there especially dark humour since “it reveals painful and unacknowledged truths about the Palestinian experience in the occupied lands and serves as a political indictment of the Zionist regime” (Mehta 476). When Amiry is asked in an interview if she ever thinks of leaving Palestine, she replies that she never thinks about it and adds: “I have a certain sensibility, a certain sense of humour. I belong to Palestine culturally. I’m like a flower in its natural habitat, or an indigenous tree” (Cooke, 2005). This sense of humour made Amiry come to terms with living in occupied Palestine and also helped her in belonging to or rather being implanted in Palestine, her home.

Place and identity:

Amiry’s sense of place and belonging was further revealed in founding a centre of architectural conservation called RIWAQ. It mainly works on the rehabilitation of architectural sites in Palestine and its main aim as shown in the description on their online site is “preserving Palestinian collective memory through projects that document and restore architectural heritage sites across the West Bank and Gaza” (Amiry, “Our Story”). According to the online site of RIWAQ, the organization succeeded in publishing three volumes that include detailed histories, maps, and photos of approximately 420 villages in sixteen districts across the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza. This interest in preserving cultural sites is derived from the impulse to affirm national identity and the sense of place which emanates from the attachment to land which reflects the people who lived on it (Al-Ju’beh, “Cultural Heritage in Palestine”). The antithesis between the destruction of indigenous places on the side of the colonizer and the eagerness to restore these sites, fighting the Israeli skyscrapers which aim to change the Palestinian architectural and cultural identity on the Palestinian side, reflects how important these sites are in regaining a national collective identity.

The conservation of historical sites derives from yearning to a place which is often associated with the memories and the stories of the pre-Nakba generation. These memories do not actually resolve the conflict between imagination and reality or make one feel at home since “to be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee” (Tyson 438). It is a continuous state of being grounded to the past. The younger Palestinian generation grew up hearing stories from their parents and grandparents about the glorious era of Palestine which they have not actually seen in reality. Meanwhile, the occupier is changing the identity of the place through the destruction of architectural and historical sites and building new settlements whereas the new generations grow up in exile fascinated by westernized Palestine and

“seem happy to replace the old dwellings with higher-rise, concrete-framed buildings that can accommodate an increasing population within the limited areas available” (Golzari and Sharif 124). Mourid El Barghouthi further discusses the effect of the destruction of places/ identity on the new generations living in exile by stating that “the long occupation that created Israeli generations born in Israel and not knowing another ‘homeland’ created at the same time generations of Palestinians strange to Palestine” (62). Those generations who have always been in exile not having a genuine image of home, as the exile is the only place to have any traces of home, develop a sense of estrangement towards their original home; the one they are supposed to belong to. They rather feel imprisoned outside what they are familiar with. Home is not only about the memories or the ruins of the past but it is rather about the sense of belonging developed despite any changes in the outer peel. This results in a tendency among Palestinians in exile to create an imaginary version of home.

The question of identity:

In her books, Amiry always seems to relate issues of checkpoints, humour and feminism all together. Her sense of humour is always the protagonist in her writings especially in tough situations like demonstrations or rallies stressing the importance of the role of women in handling these situations. The juxtaposition between occupation and the personal experience and feelings resulting from this occupation, reflects Palestinian reality and effaces any sense of detachment or distance as readers can relate to the same situations. Palestinian women writers like Ghada Elkarmi constantly deal with the issues of colonization and patriarchy as two sides of the same coin in their writings. These writings took different forms sharing a resisting force against any kind of hegemony because “Palestinian women’s life writing is as scathing about the oppressiveness of the traditional gender economy as it is about foreign Occupation” (Gilbert 60). In *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*, Amiry narrates one of the demonstrations held on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 1992 which marks International Women’s day. Although the demonstration failed to issue any law regarding the welfare of the Palestinians, it actually succeeded in proving that women can “single-handedly organize one of the biggest anti-Occupation demonstrations” (92). She delves into the issue of male hegemony where Palestinian women suffer from double occupation on the hands of both Palestinian and Israeli men as she further describes the demonstrations’ day as “the one day when Palestinian men see Israeli soldiers beat up and shoot at Palestinian women but will not do much about it” (93). This is one among many examples where Amiry uses her sarcasm and humour to present how the personal and the political are intertwined in her writings. The state of

Palestinian women as doubly oppressed by both patriarchy and occupation is reminiscent of women in colonized countries.

In order to enforce their power, colonizers tend to force restrictions on a peoples' freedom by enforcing regulations that strangle their movement around a place and make them rather imprisoned in their own home. Thus, colonizers created checkpoints as they feel threatened due to their denied illegal status and the colonized are always in an urge to prove their existence whenever they want to cross over from one place to another. In Avram Bronstein's opinion, what creates a carceral society is places like check points which are "intended to prevent Palestinian violence against Israelis. But carceralization has had more insidious outcomes; dividing Palestinians, confiscating their land, destroying their livelihoods, and, thus giving rise to some submission (collaboration with occupiers or emigration) but mostly to resistance (ranging from non-cooperation to militancy)" (106). Checkpoints are places of uneven power where Israeli soldiers are creative when it comes to dehumanizing practices regarding the Palestinians. There are almost "three hundred and sixty checkpoints separating Palestine from Palestine" (Amiry, *Golda Slept here* 63). Indeed, they force limitation on the Palestinian movement and freedom.

Amiry again reviews the issue of check points in a situation she had been subjected to in 1991 during the Gulf War. The Israeli occupation lifted the curfew for a few hours in which she went with her husband to do some grocery shopping. They were stopped on their way back by an Israeli soldier who shouted "stop the engine and get out of the car immediately" (*Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* 66). One of the officers started body searching her husband, Salim, and ordered him to empty the shopping bags. Amiry could not do anything except stare at the Israeli officer. The officer started to become angry and ordered her to stop staring but she just started thinking about the people who were stuck at other check points with access denied: old people, pregnant women, kids going to school, sick people. The Israeli soldier even accused Salim of not being able to force his wife to behave. Amiry adds that her act of staring made the Israeli soldier drag them to the 'Civil Administration' headquarters where they were released later, as the Captain there realized that there are much more important things than a wife staring at an officer. Amiry ends the chapter with a remark on how she was the one who started it all but her husband was the one blamed for it, as if it was a punishment not for the act of staring itself but for the husband not being able to control his wife. This further reveals how patriarchy and occupation are interwoven which proves that the personal and the political intersect in women's writings.

Checkpoints act as a source of power to the colonizers as most of the permits seem impossible to get in Palestine which makes Palestinians feel confined in their own country. Amiry expresses her frustration with the permits she has to obtain to move about the country: "a permit to enter

Jerusalem, another to go out to Jordan, a third to enter Israel, a fourth to work in Israel, an impossible one to enter Gaza, and a four- hour permit to use the airport” (9). She also adds that she “felt extremely uncomfortable carrying a document in Hebrew” that allowed her into Palestine (16). These restrictions force the Palestinians to live far from their home which makes them feel rootless or rather sorry for these roots as “their Palestinian roots cannot be forgiven” (Barghouthi 140). These roots act as a sign of shame and humiliation when it comes to issuing permits such as when Amiry, on her wedding day, was crossing a bridge and an Israeli soldier tore her permit in front of her eyes and ordered her to return to Amman (*Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* 32). Despite her right to stay with her husband, she was denied of this right. She lived illegally for three years in Palestine “just like the other one hundred and twenty thousand Palestinian wives (with children) living in occupied territories” (33).

Confinement and displacement have made Palestinians in need to prove themselves every day; not only to others, but also to themselves. The Palestinian identity is always questioned and doubted since “the grip over Palestinian existence also means living in confinement, living through and abiding by the laws of borders, limitations on movement and life, enforced IDs and permits, separations between the self and home, rootlessness and imprisonment; it is a condition defined by temporality, instability, displacement and anonymous existence” (Habib, 80). Amiry managed to get her residency card but in exchange, she had to go to a celebration which was supposed to be televised with the Israeli military governor and the Mayor of Ramallah (*Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* 34). Even after conforming to this hidden order, she did not manage to get her residency after waiting for fourteen years. This act represents the continuous struggle and humiliation the Palestinians are subjected to in order to prove their existence in a country that is originally theirs.

An ID card, “places individuals in a field of surveillance . . . and situates them in a network of writing: it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 189). It is a form of the power exercised over Palestinians that aims to suppress them and deny their rights as identity cards penetrate every aspect of their lives. They give way to questioning the sense of place and feeling homeness reducing Palestine to a mere space. In *Golda Slept Here*, Amiry gives examples of different cases of Palestinians who could not acquire a Palestinian ID or struggle to renew it like a two year old boy whose mother is from Jerusalem but could not acquire a Jerusalem ID as his father is from the west bank; others who lost their ID cards because they stayed abroad more than two years, others who had their houses demolished and faced

eviction, a woman who could not have her Ramallah husband live with her and her children in Jerusalem and many others (150).

In the process of acquiring an Israeli identity, the new Palestinian generations seem to be losing their Palestinian identity as reflected in the scene where Amiry's niece, Diala, visited her. Diala made a comment on how lovely the Hyatt Regency Hotel is as she does not know that this hotel was built on the land confiscated from Raja Shehadeh's father. Amiry adds that the "Israelis are very skilled at not leaving any traces showing that others were living on this land not so long ago" (*Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* 113). The colonizer here is not destroying places only but also tightening its grip on the Palestinian identity through the destruction of the Palestinians' sense of place. Edward Relph elaborates on the idea of the psychological distance and detachment from a place comparing between insiderness and outsiderness. Relph explains that there are types of outsiderness such as existential outsiderness which is awareness of the meaning withheld but with an inability to participate in those meanings while objective outsiderness is a deliberately "dispassionate attitude towards places" (*Place and Placelessness* 49). In the case of the younger generation, like Diala, they experience existential outsiderness and a state of alienation when visiting Palestine.

Relph believes that "the static physical setting, the activities and the meanings- constitute the three basic elements of the identity of places" (Relph, "Sense of Place" 47). That is why restoration of historical sites in Palestine is also a restoration of the identity of these places and a regeneration of the sense of these places transforming them from being a mere space or a location on the map to a meaningful site. It is also a means towards reconciliation with the past as "heritage in its broader meaning is associated with inheritance, with handing something from the past to the present generation. However, it is not only the past, but it is also about the contemporary activities, meanings and practices that we draw from the past to shape our future" (Golzari and Sharif 123). This can be achieved through overcoming the loss and making up with the past in order to achieve the transition which was described by Edward Said as a movement from "being in exile to becoming a Palestinian once again" (Said, *The Politics of Dispossession* 4). It is a way of belonging and an escape from the fixed moulds of the older generation which are "daily reminders of the cataclysmic fall from grace" (Shehadeh VIII). The past hindered many Palestinians from returning as they were so grounded in their imagination. They have also imprisoned the younger generation in memories. This imprisonment can be seen in the words of Raja Shehadeh when he described his state as a prisoner of memories: "For a long time I was hostage to the memories, perceptions, and attitudes of others that I could not abandon. My sense of place was not mine. But I never thought I had the right to claim it. My elders knew better. I felt it was natural to refer to them on such matters"

(2). This entrapment in the past has produced nostalgia to the past era where it was easy to move around Palestine without the “call for security check” (Amiry, *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* 7). Being confined in the past memories and experiences, which are not actually personal but rather forced by the older generation, is a prohibition from producing a personal sense of place and rather create a sense of estrangement and an exilic experience even at home. This entrapment in the Pre-Nakba period is a continuous reminder to Palestinians that “no matter what, you do not flee your town, you stay home” (IX).

The exilic situation of the Palestinians:

Exile is not only experienced out of home but it is also witnessed at home when one is not being familiar with the setting of a natural habitat. This sense of exile is reflected in many Palestinian writings. For example, in his novel *Road to the Sea*, Faruq Wadi captured his illusionary expectations after he was shocked by the reality after returning home. He wondered about the stories he heard from his father about home and he could not feel the “kinship” which his father described. Wady could not help but ask himself: “this is it?” (Wadi 599). Exile for the Palestinians is not just the “unbearable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home”, but also a denial of dignity and identity, a continuous state of solitude and deprivations, a discontinuous state of being and a cut off from the roots, land and past (Said, *Reflections on Exile* 137-142). It is experienced out of home when the memories and habits of life inherited from the native land are inconsistent with the habits of this exile. It may force one to behave and act according to these new habits not according to his/ her free will while exile at home is often experienced after a person involuntarily spend time out of this “home” which leads to a denial of a person’s being because of the difference in experience.

According to the geographer Edward Relph, “places are constructed in our memories and affections through repeated encounters and complex associations. Place experiences are necessarily time-deepened and memory qualified. In geographical experience, a place is an origin; it is where one knows others and is known to others; it is where one comes from and it is one’s own” (“Geographical Experiences” 26-27). In most of the stories narrated by Palestinians, place is always the protagonist as the ongoing battle between the Palestinians and the Israelis is place bounded. The history of shaping an Israeli identity is associated with a Palestinian dispossession, forced migration and cultural vandalism and the history of reaffirming a Palestinian one is always associated with reclaiming places which are the origins of Palestinian existence. This is the main asset of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, one was seeking belonging to a certain culture, to a

place, and the other is seeking to regain the place. It is a changeable state from dispersion to belonging and vice versa.

The idea of belonging and rootedness is always connected to place and in the Palestinian case, place is the defining factor of a person's identity, whether in or out of this place. It plays an important role in creating a sense of belonging. Palestinians are in a state of exile in their home because of the changing geography of Palestine as a result of the Israeli practices and the destruction of places. Being aware of the importance of place in shaping a person's identity, Israel demolishes places and historical sites that are significant in the Palestinian culture. Habib further discusses this idea and explains that "the process of Judisation is a process of acquisition and reinvention of the stories that the land itself can tell: places, villages, have been changed and renamed" (77). This idea is also articulated in *Sharon and My Mother-In-Law* where Amiry tackles the issue of erasing Palestinian cultural heritage and gives examples of the changing geography of Palestine. She was walking in the streets of what was once a flourishing Arab town and became an Israeli artists' colony (25). Her encounter with Nabulus was described as "unbearable" after the Nabulsi and Canaan soup factories have been razed to the ground (165). She also describes the Israeli wall, which was supposedly built for Israel's security, as separating Palestinians from Palestine (188). These geographical changes are simply strangling forces that dislocate Palestinians and fragment their identity and sense of place. It transforms the concrete geography of Palestine to an abstract form. Amiry seems to sum up in a nutshell the Nakba in the form of verse in her book *Golda Slept Here*: "when they arrived her name was Palestine/ and when they left her name had become Israel" (15). She lists what she calls the "larger- than- life losses" such as seas, mountains, hills, plains, valleys, lakes, towns, cities, factories, offices, markets, mosques, churches, holy shrines, monasteries, hospitals, clinics, pharmacies, villages, schools "but most of all people mourned the loss of a home" (15-16).

Place and identity in *Golda Slept Here*:

In *Golda Slept Here*, Amiry tries to convey the Israeli point of view in some of the scenes and reflect their feelings as they live in what used to be Palestinian homes because there has been an Israeli backlash after the release of *Sharon and My Mother in Law*. For example, one Israeli reader responded by a question to Amiry in an article: "Do you expect my mother to go back to Czechoslovakia? And look for her confiscated home? And what about me? I was born here, am I to take a dive in the sea?" (O'Dwyer, "the Human Side of Occupation"). This backlash evolves from the fact that the new Israeli generation does not know a home except for Palestine; they were born and raised there. The reader also added that she experienced confinement in her own house due to suicide bombers. She added that Palestinians have to accept their existence because simply they have nowhere to go. Amiry also explained the situation from her point of view by

stating that she believes in the balance between Palestinians and Israelis (O'Connor). She is even against terrorists and suicide bombers; she justifies her situation arguing that the first suicide bombing occurred in 1996 and it did not end the occupation. Amiry believes that international law grants Palestinian the right to resist the occupation. She may refuse the way of resistance, but still it is a way and only the Palestinians have the right to decide about it. What Amiry tries to reflect in her writings is the complexity of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; a complexity which shows how place and identity are integrally interwoven in the Palestinian experience.

*Golda Slept Here* is more tragic than Amiry's earlier books as she digs deeper towards the idea of dispossession and losing home. Apparently, the title of the book, the subtitle *Palestine: Presence of the Absence* and the photo of the famous villa of Haroun El Rashid, which was confiscated by the Israeli prime minister Golda Meir, on the cover incorporate the book's main theme which is places and how they are an important asset in shaping the Palestinian identity. They reinforce a Palestinian identity though it might have been destroyed or lost for the sake of Israeli residents. The main focus in this book is not on Amiry's personal life as she traces the life of five characters and how they dealt with losing their home. Amiry, here, is further, expanding the importance of places to Palestinians beyond her own personal experience. The main two characters are Andoni Baramki, the first Palestinian architect, and her cousin Huda. She also gives glimpses from the lives of other characters such as Gabi Bramki, Nahil and her famous mother in law, Marie Jabaji. There is also an insight into the life of Israelis who live in the houses that used to belong to Palestinians as well.

The first part in *Golda Slept Here*, "Remembering and Forgetting", is also quite revealing about the Palestinian struggle between the memories of a promised land and the reality of a lost one. Amiry narrates how the Palestinian house owners have embarked on a silent march stood in front of their houses with floods of tears for not being able to enter their houses which are now occupied by Israeli residents. She also explains how these Israeli residents were afraid and nervous watching the Palestinians from behind the curtains. It has taken her about three years to process this pain and fear and come out with this book (4). The characters in this book are trapped in the past memories of their lost homes. They are unable to overcome these memories and thus they live in a continuous state of pain and struggle. The book opens up with the story of Andoni Baramki who lost his house in Jerusalem. In most of his conversations, Andoni describes his house as his beloved. "14 Km away from his beloved" were the words inscribed on his gravestone which indicates that even after death a person is rather defined by the distance away from his home. This distance between

the self and place, which is charged with memories and experiences, is a definition of who a person is. It reflects “a deep human need... for association with significant places” (Relph, *Place and Placelessness* 147).

In another scene In *Golda Slept Here*, Andoni had to fight to reclaim his beloved home. His hopes were renewed after the Jewish occupier of his house had been evicted on the hands of the Israeli court. He thought that his microcosmic victory can lead to a macrocosmic one and “perhaps he could eventually get the big occupier out of his country” (45). He went to the courtroom and paid all his savings to a renowned Israeli lawyer. Andoni started to justify and clarify how he loves his house perhaps even more than everything he owns. The judge explained to Andoni how it is not an easy matter to regain his house simply because he is an “absentee”.

Judge: ‘As far as the Israeli law is concerned you are an absentee landlord...It’s nothing personal, Mr. Baramki; there are hundreds of Arabs who are considered absentees, just like you. All Palestinian refugees whether present or absent, are considered absentees.’

Andoni: ‘Sir, the Palestinians are ‘absentees’ only because you do not allow them to be present.’ (50)

Andoni tried to resort to common sense when he remarked: “no one ever told me you are an absentee hence you should not pay the arnona” (50). The judge opted out from the situation by declaring that he is following the law and dismissed the case.

This confrontation reveals how the Palestinian existence is negated on the part of the occupier simply by declaring the Palestinian people as “absentees”. With no right of return, and even those who returned are denied of their rights in reclaiming their houses, the permits, checkpoints and ID cards are forcing the Palestinian identity into question. The reclamation of identity is always prevalent when this identity is in question or rather denied. From here came the Palestinian resistance and fight to regain their places as places only belong to a specific culture. The gap between identity and places is enclosed by culture as culture restores “an attachment to our natural base, an incorporation, and provide the integration into one’s surroundings and society” (Willert 150). For persons to embody this culture, it means that they belong to a certain place. This belonging is further developed, as time goes on, to the sense of place. Thus place and culture are directly proportional forming the main assets of a person’s identity.

In *Golda Slept Here*, The prolonged reclamation of identity extended from Andoni Baramki to his son Gabi who realised at the age of twenty one that “there was no proof that he had ever had a life in Jerusalem; there was no way home”. All he had then was the past and his teenage memories which were filled with “pitching tents and setting up refugee camps” (57). He lived in a continuous state of exile and estrangement, whether as a refugee in Lebanon or when he returned to Palestine. He found himself standing in a line for the grand opening of a new museum in Jerusalem.

Everything around him reminded him of the loss. He found the crowds around him acting normally “like normal people in a normal country” (69) despite the unordinary situation while he was the one in desperate need to feel this kind of normality again, as this museum is his family’s house. He was even forced to pay thirty Israeli shekels to enter his own house. The difference between Gabi and his father and mother is that Gabi, despite the senseless moment, was able to overcome the past and bring himself to visit the house again, while his father died without seeing “his beloved” and his mother could not even bring herself to stand in the queue. He was even thankful to the fact that there were teenagers in the queue who were not yet born or were toddlers in 1967.

Huda is also trapped in the past memories of her family’s house. She never “uses the past tense when it comes to Palestinian ownership of properties in Jerusalem or Israel” (81). Her obsession with the idea of loss evolved from the stories she used to hear from her grandmother about Palestine and also saw her father cry many times when someone mentions their house. She grew up with a memory occupied by the day the Israeli soldiers came to confiscate their house but her grandmother refused to abandon it like she did in 1948. What is distinctive about Huda is that she is fighting the idea of loss trying to feel at home unlike Nahil, Huda’s cousin, who has a strong sense of estrangement as she has been in exile for long. Regularly, Huda paid visits to her house and she was even threatened with deportation if she was caught around her house again because there was an Israeli family living there. She would go and pick up pieces of a window or a door of what used to be her house. Amiry was not so comfortable with how Huda acts as she thinks that “architectural details lose their historic significance once removed from their cultural context... exactly like Palestinians who lost their significance once they were removed from their natural habitat, their homeland” (102).

As a young child, Huda fell to the spell of the stories she used to hear from her grandmother and father about their 1948 house in west Jerusalem. She was stunned by the reality when she went to visit the old house. Everything she saw, in west Jerusalem was “shabby and poor” (130). As a child, she wanted so much to return to her house in East Jerusalem, as this was the only reality she knew, but when they saw the house itself, she realized that these stories were actually true. Unfortunately, the Israeli family living there kicked them out. From that moment, Huda’s obsession with the idea of loss started. She was trapped between the fact that this house belongs to her family and the fact that they are denied this right.

The contradiction between the imagined homeland and the actual reality resulted in a sense of alienation and dispossession. For a long time, Amiry

was also a prisoner of her father's fears of returning home and was always captivated by her sense of estrangement in Jerusalem, which is quite apparent when she describes her feelings during her visit in her book *Golda Slept Here*: "there is no other place on this earth where I feel such a strong sense of being a stranger than in my historic homeland" (91). In this case, home is closer to being a prison that will lead to an obsession with the idea of loss, which is prevalent in the case of Palestinian diaspora developing a fear of being a stranger at home, since the "Palestinian identity is defined by the forces of two negations: the Israeli and Arab negations that have forced into being Palestinian non-being" (Habib 78). This idea was also reflected in Darwish's lines 'you are not going there, and you do not belong here' (*Memory for forgetfulness* 17) which represents how Palestinians are torn by their obligation to defend their "palestinianess" (Habib 73), both in exile and in their native homeland without actually belonging to any of them. As implied by Habib, "palestinianess" is sometimes inherited rather than experienced especially in the case of the younger Palestinian generation who has grown up in exile and may only know Palestine from their parent's stories. The forced migration of Palestinians has created generations living on the hyphen; not naturally belonging anywhere but have rather to create their sense of belonging which has a major effect on their identity.

Suad Amiry was hit by the sudden fact that she is a stranger at home when she realized that she was living according to her parents' reminiscence of home, and her familiarity with Palestine was a result of their recollections and her scattered childhood memories:

I would sit and listen to my father describing his house, and construct in my mind what the house and Palestine looked like. In the end, I think I became an architect because of those two cities: the strong presence of a Damascene mother and the strong images of the old city of Damascus and its alleys, and the absence of my father's house and country. One was absent, and the other was very present. ("A Conversation with Palestinian Author", *IMEU*)

The above lines show how places play an important role in shaping a person's identity with their strong presence in memories. These memories construct her definition of home and rather create a sense of estrangement when they are found in reality. She is also greatly affected by her father's experience especially when he went to visit his house and was not allowed in by the Israeli family that lived there. Despite her stubbornness and her arguments with her mother about going back to Palestine and visiting her father's house, Amiry explains in her book *Golda Slept Here* that she "never had the emotional courage to visit" her family's house because of her father's experience (5). Later on in her book, she overcomes her fear and goes to visit her father's house to find an Israeli family living there acting all friendly "as if they were normal people in a normal country" (98). She ends her book with a poem explaining how she yearns for an ordinary day where the occupier is not the one acting normal about usurping the land or

perhaps an amnesia that will remove any trace related to the memories or thoughts about Palestine (192).

Amiry stresses the fact that the Israelis are always playing the role of the victims by acting normal and she even repeated it several times in her book. The Israelis are simply unconcerned about the past and do not have the slightest intention to even know the names of the Palestinian tenants of the houses. They are in a continuous state of denial concerning the past, while the Palestinians are captivated by it and torn between the image of the land and the reality. Since memories are “the stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences that contribute so powerfully to the intrinsic memorability. An alert and alive memory connects spontaneously with place finding in it features that favour and parallel its own activities. We might say that memory is naturally place oriented or at least place-supported” (Casey 186-187). These memories of places are confining as they trap their hostages to the past and in order to come to terms with the past, these memories must be banished from the brain.

In the end of her book *Golda Slept Here*, Amiry addresses Palestine “will you ever set us free?” (193). This question remains unanswered in the book but is perhaps answered in reality. Amiry succeeds in living according to her own memories not her parents’. That does not mean that she forgot about the past, but she rather comes to terms with it and incorporates it within the present. She accepts exile in itself, as a state of belonging that is hardly constituted by putting together the fragments of national identity paving the way towards a return. It is considering the past as a fresh start, not the finish line as perhaps exile implies. Building up an identity is a matter of choice as people at home might not grasp the notion of home, while those in exile are aware of it. The past in this case serves as a tool of resistance not a grounding force. It helps in creating an identity by quilting together the past memories of home and land with the present exile, since identity is not fixed but rather fluid. In short, people’s identity is integrated according to the multiple places, not only to one place.

Returning to Palestine was not an easy choice for Amiry as she is a woman whose parents left Palestine, fled to many Arab countries and settled in Jordan with no intention to return to their home. Her decision to settle in Ramallah was not the easiest decision. What began as a touristic visit rather changed into a bond where she willingly decided to stay in a country she considered, home. No one chooses their nationality, but the case here is different, because Amiry is a Palestinian who decided to search for her own roots as the Palestinian return represents the “recapture of being Palestinian and of Palestine” (Habib 71). She was not grounded by the occupation despite the incidents she encounters with the Israeli soldiers, as in her

writings she always puts bits and pieces of everyday experiences that anyone may be subjected to in any country. She succeeded in embracing the loss, creating a third space encompassing the memories of the past and the present reality creating a positive diaspora.

The idea of mobility has broadened the defining factors of identity as “we all have a lot of identities, and it is changing. The whole issue of belonging to one place has changed in the world, at least for a certain class around the world” (Abdullah, “Suad Amiry: A Conversation”). A place might have a fixed identity but an identity is affected by multiple places. That is why accepting the reality that people belong to several places and not only one helps them in figuring out who they really are. Amiry expresses this idea in her book *Nothing to Lose but your Life* in which she exposes the state of Palestinian workers. As they have to move all the time, crossing borders, passing from one checkpoint to the other, the workers have created a “mobile sense of home and belonging... home is not confined to national boundaries... home is a portable construct that moves beyond border demarcations and other restrictions as an internalized sense of homing” (Mehta 478). In order to survive the harsh reality in Palestine, these workers have created their sense of home as they work between Palestine and Israel. “the self only becomes a self on the condition that it has suffered a separation ... a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through a melancholic incorporation of some ‘Other’” (Butler 27). The workers in this book as described by Mehta, are torn between Israel which represents their source of income and Palestine which is considered as their lost ancestral home (479). Thus, a person’s identity is better understood in relation to an ‘other’ and not simply a detached or secluded creation of a sense of home. It is not only based on materialistic roots but rather developed from an internalized mobile sense of home. In Nathalie Handal’s opinion, home to Palestinians is a deeply rooted spiritual and emotional form (“Mahmoud Darwish”, *The Progressive*). Therefore, home “moves beyond border demarcations and other restrictions as an internalized sense of homing” (Mehta 478).

### **Conclusion:**

The process of writing acts as an emergency exit to the Palestinians from the harsh reality. It provides a healing space after the pain and agony that result from occupation. Palestinian writers like Suad Amiry transform personal experiences into collective memories to pave the way for embracing the loss. Amiry overcomes the barriers of the past and skilfully incorporates the past with the present as she does not allow the idea of loss to develop into an obsession with an imagined Palestinian land and identity. Her books are a portrayal of the Palestinian reality since they do not only depict the cruel practices of the occupier, but they also reflect the Palestinian society with its domestic flaws. Amiry is not even ashamed of depicting her own flaws with her excellent sense of humour and black

comedy which are prevalent in ruthless situations. In her attempt to deal with issues of feminism, patriarchy, checkpoints, permits, IDs, restoration of old buildings, land and identity, she presents a different perspective of Palestinian experience: one which transcends pain and loss through humour and sarcasm. Her first book *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* documents her return to Ramallah and how she dealt with the personal and political issues in Palestine. What is significant about this book is that it does not deal with the daily ordeals under occupation leaving readers in tears, but it rather delivers the idea with sarcasm creating a formula of pain and laughter. Her latest book *Golda Slept Here* portrays the Palestinian return and how Palestinians survive the loss of their homes to Israelis. It also provides insights into the life of Israelis in Palestinian houses. Amiry's books in general reflect her idea of home and how her mobile sense of home helped her to maintain a third space of existence as a result of bridging the past with the present overcoming the entrapment of permits and checkpoints.

**الملخص:****المكان و الهوية في أعمال مختارة لسعاد العمري و ناعومي شهاب ناي راجية السعيد أبو النصر السعيد**

تتناول الرسالة ارتباط المكان بالهوية و فكرة موطن الإنسان الأساسي و كيف يؤثر تنقله من مكان لآخر عليه بوجه عام. تعتمد هذه الرسالة في تطبيقها نصين لسعاد العمري و هما "شارون وأم زوجي" و "هنا رقدت جولدا" و أعمالا مختارة لناعومي شهاب ناي و من ضمنها "بلدان" و "القدس". تستخدم الدراسة نظرية ارتباط المكان بالهوية و التي يتم دائما اغفالها و خاصة في أعمال الكتاب الفلسطينيين. فالمحتل دائما ما ينكر وجود المحتل بانكار وجوده في المكان من البداية.

تستعرض الرسالة في مضمونها تطور فكرة المكان منذ عهد أرسطو حتي عصرنا هذا و تهدف الي عرض الاختلاف بين نظرة الرجل و المرأة للمكان و ارتباطه بالهوية و أيضا الاختلاف بين كتابات امرأة تقيم بالولايات المتحدة في حالة ناي و بين امرأة تقيم في رام الله في حالة العمري. و تحاول الرسالة اجابة بضعة أسئلة حول كيفية الارتباط المكان بالهوية و كيف يؤثر علي تكوينها و كيف يمكن الوصول لطريق للتصالح عن طريق المكان.

تستخدم الرسالة نظريات عدة نقاد عن المكان و الهوية و من ضمنهم جاستون باشلارد و ادوارد ريلف. فكتابات باشلارد دائما مع تعتمد علي البعد النفسي و ترسخ موطن الإنسان الأساسي في تكوينه أما رأي ريلف، فالمكان عنصر يصنعه الإنسان اجتماعيا. تتضمن الرسالة ثلاث فصول: الفصل الأول هو مقدمة عن تعريف المكان بشكل عام و ارتباطه بوجود الإنسان و هويته و محاولات محو الهوية الفلسطينية بمحو مناطق أثرية كاملة. الفصل الثاني يتناول نصين لسعاد العمري و تحليلهم من حيث ارتباط المكان بالهوية و وجهة نظر العمري كمواطنة فلسطينية مقيمة برام الله. الفصل الثالث و الأخير يتناول بعض قصائد ناي و تخيل المكان فيهم حيث أن ناي مقيمة بالولايات المتحدة و لكن يشترك ناي و عمري في استمداد روح المقاومة في كتابتهم من احساسهم بالمكان. و برغم ان العمري تعتمد علي الفكاهاة في كتاباتها و أن ناي تعتمد علي الشاعرية و التأمل، إلا أن كلتاهما تشتركان في نشر التفاؤل و الأمل من خلال كتابتهم

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