Representations of ‘Home’ from the Setting of ‘Exile’:  
Novels by Arab Migrant Writers

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as a thesis for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy in Arab and Islamic Studies 
in November 2011

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Abstract

The attempt to come to terms with the meaning of home, both literally and metaphorically, has become a major concern in literary studies. This dissertation explores the various novelistic representations of home from the point of view of Arab migrant novelists. Home, which contains various references to architectural structures, nations, states, or belonging, can no longer be thought of as a generalized or unified experience. For the migrant writer, the concept of home takes shape as a result of interaction between the past and the present, with memory playing a powerful role. It is created as a result of various forces in tension that include personal and national experiences, the context within which migration from the traditional home place occurred, ideological allegiances and identity politics. I argue through my exploration of a number of novels written by Arab writers who migrated from their home countries that the concept of home can no longer be referred to as a generalized, definite or a fixed notion.

Given the different circumstances of the movement from one country to another, even among nationals of the same country, what are the themes that will be stressed in an Arab writer’s imagination and portrayal of home? Will writers stress the exclusions of exile, and define their presence away from the original country clearly as ‘exile’, fixating on painful nostalgia? How does memory influence the perception of home? Will those writers who have lived a long time in a new ‘foreign’ country emphasize the adaptations in the diaspora and the privileges of migration? Will they offer critiques of the national project, making a clear distinction between the personal home and the national project? Will such boundaries be as clearly defined for all the writers?

Those questions guide my investigation into the representation of home in the novels of Palestinian, Lebanese and Iraqi writers living away from their three countries of origin. This investigation takes place within the postcolonial theoretical framework of the implications of the site of migration about the revision of the centrality of the nation as a referent of identity. The analysis uncovers a variety of illustrations in the imagination of home and the portrayal of the national experience in the novels. The analysis also highlights the inextricable link between the personal experience and the political experience, whereby the ideological stance on issues of nation and nationalism cannot be easily isolated in an assessment of the cultural product at the site of migration.
Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................... 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS......................................................................................................................... 3

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ......................... ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION ...... ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

INTRODUCTION ......................................... ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

1. Contribution to the Field of Arabic Literary Study .......... Error! Bookmark not defined.
2. Emergent Literature of the Middle East ....................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. A Note on Interpretation ........................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.

CHAPTER ONE ........................................... ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

CONTEXTUALIZING MIGRANT LITERATURE .............. ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

1. Migration in Postcolonial Theory ............................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
   1.1 The Problem with Metaphorization ........................ Error! Bookmark not defined.
   1.2 Metaphorizing Migration and the National Question ... Error! Bookmark not defined.

2. Migrants’ Journeys and the Dynamics of Memory ........ Error! Bookmark not defined.
   2.1 Remembering Home ......................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
   2.2 Nostalgia as (Home-)Sickness .............................. Error! Bookmark not defined.
   2.3 Distinguishing between Home and Homeland ........ Error! Bookmark not defined.

3. Classifications of Migrant Literature .......................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
   3.1 Exile and the Exilic ............................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.
   3.2 Diaspora and the Diasporic ................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.

CHAPTER TWO ........................................... ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

1. The Significance of the Homeland in the Aftermath of the Nakbah. Error! Bookmark not defined.
   1.1 The Nakbah of 1948 ......................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
2.1 Hanan al-Shaykh: Changing Reactions to the Home in the Homeland...

2.2 Zahra

2.3 In Absence of Memories of Home

2.4 Rejecting the Nation

3. Contesting the Supremacy of Narratives in Amin Maalouf’s (1949) *Le Rocher de Tanios* *(The Rock of Tanios 1993)*

3.1 Justifying Migration

3.2 The Role of Truth in Resolving/Creating Conflicts

3.3 Homeland versus Exile

4. Diasporic and Exilic Narratives in Jad el-Hage’s (1946) *The Last Migration* *(2002)*

4.1 A Novel of Diaspora and Love

4.2 Determining a Diasporic Narrative

4.3 Exilic Manifestations in el-Hage’s Narrative


5.1 Three Tales in *Somewhere, Home*

5.2 The Search for Home

5.3 Returns: “Nobody crosses the same river twice”

5.4 Home is a Recurrent Investment in Place

6. A Critique of Immigration in Rawi Hage’s (1964) *Cockroach* *(2008)*

6.1 The Nameless Immigrant in *Cockroach*

6.2 Mal-integration in the Host Country

6.3 The Global Cycle of Migration

6.4 The Personal Experience of Immigration

7. Conclusion

7.1 Different Representations of Home amongst the Lebanese Diaspora

7.2 Categories and Classifications in Lebanese Literature

7.3 Ambivalence as a Distinctive Characteristic of Migrant Literature

7.4 Migration as a Lived experience

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Home, Nation and Migration in the Iraqi Novel in the Diaspora
1. Iraq after the 2003 Anglo-American Invasion

2. Probing the Nation’s Narrative in Najm Wālī’s (1965) Șūrat Yūsuf (Yūsuf’s Picture 2004)

3. Nostalgic Yearnings in Iqbal Qazwini’s Nāfīdhat Zubaydah (Zubaida’s Window 2006)


5. Home as a Reconciliation between the Past and the Present in Muḥṣīn al-Ramlī’s (1967) Tamr al-ʿAṣābi” (Fingers of Dates 2009)

6. Conclusion

FINAL CONCLUSION

1. Representing Migration

2. Critiques of the Nation

3. Gendered Accounts

BIBLIOGRAPHY