

Navigating the Liminal Identity of Various Characters in the Novels of Hala Alyan

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ABSTRACT

Identity is a multifaceted concept encompassing the unique characteristics, beliefs, and affiliations that define an individual or group. It serves as a lens through which people perceive themselves and are recognized by others, evolving through personal experiences, social interactions, and cultural contexts. Liminal identity refers to being “in-between” or on the threshold of two or more identities, cultures, or social positions. This concept is rooted in the idea of liminality, which describes a transitional phase or space where individuals experience ambiguity, uncertainty, or transformation. A liminal identity often emerges when a person occupies a space between different identities or roles. This paper examines the recurring theme of liminal identity in Hala Alyan's novels, focusing on how her characters embody the “in-between” state of cultural, social, and personal identities. This paper has been written by using qualitatively deductive methodology. The theory of liminality by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner has been used to analyse Hala Alyan's novels, *Salt Houses* and *The Arsonists' City* to trace liminal identity, particularly within displacement, migration, and cultural hybridity. These works explore the lives of Palestinian families navigating the complexities of exile, belonging, and identity across generations.

Keywords: Identity, liminality, displacement, migration, trauma

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity refers to the multifaceted and evolving understanding of who or what a person, group, or entity is. It is shaped by individual attributes like personality, beliefs, and values, as well as external factors such as cultural background, societal roles, relationships, and professional affiliations. Identity also connects individuals to larger collectives, such as cultural, religious, or national communities, while remaining fluid and evolving with personal growth and societal changes. Identity influences how individuals perceive themselves, relate to others, and navigate the world around them. The essay, “Key Concept: Identity” by Roger Willoughby presents a comprehensive definition of identity:

Identity is about who and what I am, and who and what I am not. This may be initially understood as an amalgam of many internal and external elements. These would include bodily experience, thoughts, fantasy and imagination, gender, class, race, ethnicity, multi-layered history, habitus, capital, one's jobs or roles, one's relationships, values, spirituality, future plans and aspirations. Central to our identity is our life experienced through our own individual consciousness, our sense of self, of ‘I’ and of ‘me’. (54)

In his renowned essay, “What Is Identity (As We Now Use the Word)?” James Fearon delves into the nuanced concept of identity, categorizing it into two primary types: personal identity and social identity. He posits that identity is inherently a social construct, shaped by the interactions and dynamics within a society. Fearon undertakes an exploration of the historical development of various identity theories, while also shedding light on Erik Erikson's psychological term, “identity crisis.” Although he acknowledges the challenge of encapsulating the vast and complex notion of identity within a concise definition, Fearon attempts to define it by breaking it down into the two aforementioned categories. Social identity, as Fearon explains, pertains to a collective or social category. It encompasses a group of individuals linked by a shared label, characterized by specific rules regarding membership, as well as distinct (though sometimes stereotyped) features or attributes that are attributed to the group. On the other hand, Fearon emphasizes concepts such as dignity and self-respect when discussing personal identity. He defines personal identity as a collection of attributes, beliefs, desires, or guiding principles that an individual perceives as setting them apart in socially meaningful ways. (Fearon 2-9)

The essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” by Stuart Hall provides an insightful exploration of the concept of cultural identity and its representation, particularly in the realm of Caribbean cinema. He pays close attention to the identity of black individuals, emphasizing that cultural identity and the concept of diaspora are deeply intertwined with political, historical,

and personal dimensions, making them rich and multifaceted. Hall introduces two distinct perspectives on cultural identity. The first perspective views cultural identity as a collective framework, emphasizing the aspects that create a sense of shared characteristics and commonality among a group of people. In this approach, cultural identity serves as a unifying force, binding individuals within a particular community through shared traditions, customs, values, and experiences. It stresses the idea of continuity and sameness, looking at identity as something rooted in a collective history or a shared cultural heritage. This perspective is particularly important in providing a sense of belonging and solidarity, as it allows people to identify with a broader group and maintain their cultural cohesion across time and space.

The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people'... (223)

Liminal identity refers to a state of being and belonging that is situated at the threshold or in-between established categories of social, cultural, or personal identity. It characterizes individuals or groups who inhabit transitional spaces, navigating ambiguous or hybrid positions that resist fixed classification, often as a result of migration, cultural dislocation, or social transformation. This concept draws from the broader framework of liminality, as introduced by anthropologist Victor Turner, which describes transitional phases in rites of passage or societal structures. In essence, liminal identity encapsulates the fluid, negotiable, and often precarious nature of selfhood and social roles in transitional or boundary spaces.

In his study on rites of passage, Arnold van Gennep identifies three stages at work in transitional events such as births, marriages, and deaths: separation (the periliminal stage), transition (the liminal stage), and incorporation (the postliminal stage). While the passage itself involves an ambiguous threshold, the completion of a rite of passage establishes the individual's identity within a new social category or phase of life. (Cristina-Georgiana 11)

The Israel-Palestine conflict put thousands of Palestinians in a liminal position. The expulsion of Palestinians and the declaration of the independent State of Israel are pivotal events in the Israel-Palestine crisis, deeply rooted in historical complexities. The establishment of Israel on May 14, 1948, marked the culmination of the Zionist movement, which sought to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine. This aspiration was fueled by centuries of Jewish persecution, including the Holocaust, and was supported by international agreements such as the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947. However, the creation of Israel also led to the *Nakba*, during which over 700,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes. This mass displacement was driven by a combination of factors, including direct expulsions by Israeli forces, destruction of Palestinian villages, and psychological warfare. The Nakba not only resulted in the loss of Palestinian land and property but also created a refugee crisis that persists to this day. The declaration of Israel's independence and the subsequent Arab-Israeli War of 1948 further entrenched the division and conflict, shaping the enduring struggle over land, identity, and sovereignty in the region.

The identity of Palestinian migrants can be termed as liminal as it reflects their unique experience of being caught between multiple cultural, social, and political realities. As migrants, they often find themselves in a transitional space, navigating the challenges of displacement, exile, and adaptation to new environments while maintaining a connection to their Palestinian heritage. This liminality is shaped by their historical struggle for a homeland, the ongoing conflict, and the diaspora's diverse experiences across different host countries. For many Palestinian migrants, their identity is a blend of their cultural roots and the influences of their adopted societies. They may feel a sense of belonging to neither fully, existing in an "in-between" state. This can manifest in various ways, such as balancing traditional values with modern practices, or grappling with the political and social expectations of their host countries while advocating for Palestinian rights and recognition. The concept of liminal identity also extends to the generational experiences of Palestinian migrants. While older generations may hold onto memories of their homeland and the hope of return, younger generations often navigate a hybrid identity, blending their Palestinian heritage with the culture of their host country. This dynamic creates a rich but complex tapestry of identity, marked by resilience, adaptation, and a deep connection to their collective history.

Hala Alyan is a Palestinian-American poet, novelist, and clinical psychologist whose works delve deeply into themes of identity, displacement, and the Palestinian diaspora. She has authored acclaimed novels such as *Salt Houses* and *The Arsonists' City*, which explore the intergenerational impacts of exile and the complexities of belonging. Her poetry collections, including *Atrium* and *The Twenty-Ninth Year*, reflect her lyrical exploration of love, war, and cultural hybridity. Alyan's writing often intertwines personal and political narratives, shedding light on the struggles of refugees and immigrants while celebrating resilience and the search for home. Her work has earned her prestigious awards like the Arab American Book Award and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, solidifying her as a vital voice in contemporary literature.

Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses* delves deeply into the concept of liminal identity, particularly through its portrayal of Palestinian characters navigating displacement, cultural hybridity, and the search for belonging. The novel spans multiple generations, exploring how the characters exist in a state of "in-between"—caught between their lost homeland and the host countries where they struggle to fully integrate. The novel begins with Salma, the family matriarch, who predicts upheaval through

her daughter Alia's coffee cup reading, foreshadowing the series of displacements the family will endure. Alia, married to Atef, struggles with her own identity as they move from Palestine to Kuwait, Beirut, and Amman. Their children—Souad, Riham, and Karam—represent a new generation experiencing fragmented identities shaped by globalized, hybrid cultures. Souad, the rebellious daughter, seeks independence from her heritage, while Riham is deeply rooted in her faith, and Karam tries to find balance between tradition and modernity. Manar, Karam's daughter and part of the youngest generation, feels disconnected from the family's Palestinian roots and embarks on a journey to rediscover her identity. Alongside them are secondary characters like Widad, Salma's sister, who reflects the traditional connection to Palestine. Through the lives of Salma, Alia, Atef, Souad, Riham, Karam, and Manar, *Salt Houses* explores the emotional and cultural tolls of displacement across generations, offering a poignant reflection on what it means to belong.

Salma, the matriarch in *Salt Houses*, embodies liminal identity through her enduring connection to the homeland and her adaptability in exile. Having left Palestine, Salma grapples with a profound sense of loss and longing, yet she strives to create a semblance of stability for her family in foreign lands. Her identity is suspended between the past and present, as she holds onto memories of her roots while navigating the challenges of displacement. Salma's liminal existence is further marked by her role as a custodian of tradition, trying to pass down her cultural heritage to the next generation, even as the tides of time and geography pull her family toward hybridity and assimilation. Salma doesn't change her faith and follow her religious rituals even in Nablus. She even tries to replicate her garden of Jaffa in Nablus but soon she has to relocate again to Amman but despite the setbacks she remains a devout woman and transfers the religious values to her granddaughter Riham. Through Salma, Alyan captures the quiet strength and resilience required to exist in the in-between spaces of belonging and exile. But even on her death bed, she remembers her homeland and advises her daughter to cling to her heritage and ethnicity:

You must remember.... When it happens, you must find a way to remember.... I was wrong. I thought I could make myself see something that wasn't there. But it was a lie. I saw the houses, I saw how they were lost. *You cannot let yourself forget.* (141)

The liminal identity of Salma's younger daughter Alia is deeply rooted in her experiences of displacement and her struggle to reconcile past and present. Forced to leave her home in Palestine and resettle in different countries such as Kuwait, Beirut, and Amman, Alia's sense of self exists in a space of "in-betweenness." She misses her homeland and speaks her emotions loudly, "Nostalgia is an affliction Like a fever or cancer, the longing for what had vanished wasting a person away. Not just the unbearable losses, but the small things as well" (74-75). Alia can't adjust easily in Kuwait and wants to shift to Amman with other relatives but her husband Atef wants to run away from the memories of past and insists on staying in Kuwait where they give birth to their three children and raise them. But then again they have to face same migration and Trauma in their middle age and they move to Amman. Alia clings to the cultural and emotional ties of her homeland, yet she is constantly adapting to new environments that never quite feel like home. She scolds her daughter for not giving Arab values to her children when she says, "*You've raised the children as Americans. They barely understand what their grandmother is saying to them*" (242). Alia's character encapsulates the ongoing negotiation of belonging and alienation, making her a powerful representation of liminal identity within the novel.

Similarly, Atef's liminal identity is shaped by both his physical displacement and the emotional scars he carries. As Alia's husband, Atef is deeply affected by the loss of his homeland and the constant uprooting of his life, yet he often internalizes his struggles rather than expressing them openly. Atef carries the scars of the physical torture and harassment done to the Palestinians in Nablus. He can't forget the death of his dear friend Mustafa who was Alia's brother. His liminality is not only geographical but also psychological as he writes letters addressing to dead Mustafa. He exists in a space of unspoken grief and unresolved trauma from his imprisonment, which isolates him from his family. Atef's detachment from both his past and present creates a sense of alienation, where he is neither fully rooted in the traditions of his homeland nor entirely at peace in the new environments they inhabit. His character highlights the quieter, more introspective dimensions of liminal identity, reflecting the personal toll of displacement and the complexities of resilience.

In *Salt Houses*, the children of Alia and Atef named Souad, Riham and Karam each navigate their own liminal identities, shaped by the interplay of displacement, cultural hybridity, and generational shifts. Souad resists her family's past and seeks independence, rejecting the traditions of her Palestinian heritage, yet she struggles with a lingering sense of rootlessness as she crafts her modern identity in Paris and America. But later on, she craves for a home. Souad thinks, "*Home is in somewhere familiar, somewhere people look like us, talk like us, where you guys can learn Arabic and be near your grandparents and never come home asking what raghead means*" (207). Riham embodies a quieter struggle, deeply rooted in faith, which acts as both her anchor and a marker of isolation in the ever-changing cultural landscapes she inhabits. She surprises to everyone by wearing a *Hijab* like her grandmother Salma. Karam, the family's youngest son, experiences the pull of both tradition and modernity, caught between honoring his family's past and embracing the opportunities of a globalized world. Finally, Souad's daughter Manar, who should be the most disconnected from Palestine, knowing it only through fragmented stories visits Palestine in order to rediscover the roots of her family. However, she becomes a symbol of rediscovery, attempting to bridge the gaps and redefine her fractured identity.

Every character in *Salt Houses* experiences a liminal identity uniquely, shaped by war, exile, and cultural shifts. Whether through forced migration, religious struggles, or generational tensions, they exist between past and present, tradition and modernity, homeland and foreign land. Their identities are never fixed, always evolving in response to displacement and memory. Together, these characters paint a rich portrait of liminal existence, reflecting the tensions and complexities of belonging across generations.

Hala Alyan's second novel *The Arsonists' City* is also a multigenerational family saga that explores themes of identity, secrets, and the impact of war. The story revolves around the Nasr family, scattered across the globe, who reunite in Beirut after the death of the patriarch, Idris Nasr's father. Idris, a Lebanese cardiac surgeon, plans to sell the family home in Beirut, a decision that stirs conflict among his family members. The novel delves into the lives of Idris's Syrian wife, Mazna, and their three children: Ava, Mimi, and Naj. Ava, a professor in New York, struggles with her marriage and her identity as a Middle Eastern woman in a Western world. Mimi, a musician in Austin, grapples with his failed career and personal insecurities. Naj, a celebrated musician in Beirut, faces challenges as a closeted lesbian in a conservative society. The narrative also explores Mazna's past, including her dreams of becoming an actress and her relationship with Zakaria, Idris's childhood friend, whose murder during the Lebanese Civil War casts a long shadow over the family. As the family gathers in Beirut, long-held secrets and tensions come to light, forcing each member to confront their past and their connections to one another. The novel weaves together themes of migration, cultural hybridity, and the enduring impact of war on personal and collective identities.

Idris Nasr's experience of being "in-between" arises from his efforts to reconcile his past in Beirut with his present life in America. As a Lebanese expatriate, he exists in two distinct realms: one shaped by the vivid memories and losses of his youth during the Lebanese Civil War, and the other defined by his current roles as a devoted husband, father, and renowned cardiac surgeon in the United States. This dual existence leaves him emotionally and culturally divided, unable to fully anchor himself in either the history he left behind or the life he now leads. His choice to sell the family home in Beirut reflects an effort to cut ties with a painful past, yet it also rekindles the deep-rooted connection to his family's heritage and the unresolved conflicts that come with it. His character encapsulates the tension of living in an "in-between" space, marked by longing, loss, and the complexities of identity in a diasporic existence. At last he realises that although he has become an American citizen yet he can't detach himself from Beirut,

His heart is healing with each beat; there will be a scar, invisible to everyone, but Idris will know it's there, the dead tissue that will never regenerate. It will outlast him, with his memories and stories, his last delicious bite of cake.... The city stalks herself like a lioness. The city wants him to remember. The city wants him to forget. And so he does both. (443)

A liminal identity shaped by experiences of displacement, cultural tension, and fractured belonging is evident in a central character Idris's wife Mazna, who navigates life as a Syrian woman moving from Lebanon to the United States. Her sense of self is suspended between her past in Damascus, her complicated relationship with Beirut, and her life as an immigrant in California. Her identity is characterized by an ongoing negotiation between cultural heritage, familial obligations, and individual aspirations. This in-betweenness manifests in her struggle to reconcile her youthful aspirations as an actress with the burdens of marriage and motherhood, revealing a tension between individual desires and societal expectations. Idris persuades her for marriage by showing her the dreams of Hollywood which she could never enter due the racial discrimination. An excellent actress from Damascus becomes a worker at Greenhouse and a housewife. She lost her true identity with the migration and got physical exploitation by and producer who lured her to get her signed for a movie. Set against the backdrop of war, migration, and displacement, Mazna's character poignantly illustrates the complexities of identity formation and belonging in transitional spaces.

A profound liminal identity, shaped by the complexities of being a Palestinian refugee and navigating intricate personal relationships, is exemplified in the character of Zakaria, Idris's friend and Mazna's former lover. As a displaced person living in Lebanon, Zakaria exists in a state of perpetual uncertainty, neither fully belonging to his homeland nor securely rooted in his adopted environment. His identity is further complicated by his role as a confidant to Idris and his romantic connection to Mazna, placing him in an emotionally fraught position. Zakaria's tragic death in the camps underscores the vulnerability of his existence — a life marked by displacement, longing, and unresolved ties. His liminal state reflects broader themes of exile, statelessness, and the struggle to maintain identity in the face of instability and loss. The life and death of Zakaria reflects the liminal state of all the Palestinian migrants living in the camps as he Mazna remembers how he introduced himself to her:

He'd told her that his family was from Jaffa, that sometimes his mother whispered the name. If she forgot it, she would die.... He was Palestinian and lived in this camp. A refugee camp in Lebanon. He told me that if you forget the name of your land, that's when it's really lost. (334)

Ava, in Hala Alyan's *The Arsonists' City*, represents a liminal identity through her struggles with belonging, familial ties, and self-definition. Born to immigrant parents and raised in America, Ava exists in the in-between space of cultural hybridity, grappling with the expectations of her Lebanese-Syrian heritage, Palestinian genes of Zakaria, and her American life with a British husband. Within her family, unresolved tensions and inherited secrets place Ava in a liminal role as she used to think

that she was the daughter of a Syrian mother and a Lebanese father but in her thirties, she comes to know that a Palestinian refugee who was killed in refugee camps was his biological father. This layered portrayal underscores the complexities of identity in a transnational and intergenerational context. She herself contemplates about her liminal identity:

Her father is dead. Her father is a dead Palestinian who was killed in the camps, knifed like an animal. And her father, her father-father, the one who speaks with hearts and loves tiramisu, is a few miles away lying to all of them about why he's selling the house, the way her mother has been lying about Zakaria, the way everyone lies about everything. (407)

The manifestation of liminal identity, influenced by a dual cultural upbringing, artistic struggles, and unresolved familial tensions, is exemplified in the character of Mazna's son, Mimi. As a Lebanese-American musician living in Brooklyn, Mimi exists in a space of cultural ambiguity, feeling disconnected from both his Arab roots and his Western surroundings. His sense of identity is further complicated by his artistic insecurities and feelings of inadequacy, particularly in comparison to his sibling Naz. Mimi's emotional liminality manifests in his internal conflict torn between his desire for creative success and his deep yearning for familial acceptance. He proceeds to Harp because of compulsion and later on indulges in kissing a colleague even when he is engaged, the instability of her life has influenced his personality and all of his confusion is resolved when he visits the Beirut home and stays with his family for some time. This state of flux underscores his struggle to find belonging, both within his family and in the broader world, reflecting themes of identity fragmentation and self-doubt.

In *The Arsonists' City* by Hala Alyan, the liminal identity shaped by queerness, artistic ambitions, and strong family connections is deeply reflected in the character of Naz (Nazla Nassar), Mazna's daughter. As a queer musician returning to Beirut from America, Naz exists in a state of cultural and emotional in-betweenness — caught between her Western upbringing and her Lebanese roots. Her love for her grandfather and her determination to protect the family's ancestral home place her at odds with her family's decision to sell it, further amplifying her feelings of displacement. In Beirut, Naz's identity is suspended between her longing for connection to her heritage and her struggle for personal authenticity as a queer artist, she wants to tell the world that she is a lesbian but she can't disclose the fact without telling it to her traditional parents. She feels a connection with her roots even after the American upbringing and feels shattered with the death of her grandfather:

But there is something blank and yawning within her that's grown since *Jiddo's* passing; it's like she's been shaken loose from a safe branch.... Since his death, everything feels painfully exposed. Her hungover afternoons and morose moods, the way she dislikes women after she sleeps with them—she is aware of it all, like a smell she can't identify the source of. (82)

In this way, all the characters in *The Arsonists' City* are going through liminal dilemmas which has shaped their personality and put indelible influences on their existence. Mazna's identity is shaped by her Syrian roots, her experiences in Beirut, and her role as an immigrant mother in the United States. Her children — Mimi, Ava, and Naz — also struggle with their bicultural identities, feeling estranged from both their Lebanese background and their Western upbringing. Among them, Naz stands out as a queer musician navigating the tension between her family's expectations and her pursuit of artistic expression and personal truth. Zakaria's experience as a Palestinian refugee further highlights themes of statelessness and social exclusion. Through these interconnected stories, Alyan presents liminal identity as a condition of cultural and emotional in-betweenness, marked by yearning, self-reflection, and the ongoing search for belonging across fragmented identities and histories.

2. CONCLUSION

The novels *Salt Houses* and *The Arsonists' City* by Hala Alyan intricately explore the concept of liminal identity, depicting characters who exist in spaces of cultural, emotional, and physical in-betweenness. In *Salt Houses*, the Yacoub family's generational displacement — from Palestine to Kuwait, Lebanon, and the United States — reveals the fragmented nature of identity that emerges from exile and migration. Characters like Alia, who struggles to maintain cultural traditions while adapting to new environments, and Riham, whose spirituality isolates her within her own family, exemplify this state of being "in-between." Similarly, in *The Arsonists' City*, figures such as Mazna, whose life straddles Syria, Lebanon, and America, and her children Mimi, Ava, and Naz who wrestle with their bicultural identities, illustrate the complexities of belonging in the diaspora. Zakaria's identity as a Palestinian refugee further underscores themes of statelessness and loss. Across both novels, Alyan's characters are defined by their attempts to reconcile personal aspirations with cultural expectations, individual desires with collective memory, and attachment to the past with the need to forge new paths. By portraying identity as fluid and ever-evolving, Alyan highlights the emotional weight of displacement, the fragility of home, and the resilience required to exist between worlds. Ultimately, her exploration of liminal identity underscores how deeply migration, exile, and intergenerational trauma shape one's sense of self.

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