



**BETWEEN HOME AND EXILE: IDENTITY,
HYBRIDITY, AND BELONGING IN ALYAN'S
*THE ARSONISTS' CITY***

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of diasporic identity, hybridity, and belonging in Alyan's *The Arsonists' City* (2021), with particular attention to the Nasr family's transnational experiences between Beirut and the United States. It examines how migration, displacement, memory, intergenerational conflict, inherited trauma, and return to the homeland shape unstable and continuously negotiated identities. The study employs a qualitative and interpretive research methodology based on close textual analysis and draws primarily on Bhabha's (1994) concepts of the Third Space, hybridity, ambivalence, and the unhomely. The findings reveal that Alyan does not represent hybrid identity as a harmonious synthesis of Lebanese and American cultures; rather, it emerges as an unfinished and often painful condition shaped by cultural contradiction, emotional fragmentation, and incomplete belonging. The analysis further demonstrates that memory and inherited trauma function as important sites of identity negotiation, while domestic spaces become unhomely through secrecy, displacement, and unresolved family histories. Gendered and racialized experiences also complicate access to belonging, showing that cultural negotiation occurs within unequal relations of power. Moreover, return to Beirut fails to restore an authentic or stable identity because both the homeland and the diasporic subjects have been transformed by migration, history, and time. The study concludes that the Third Space in *The Arsonists' City* is not merely a temporary stage between cultures but a persistent condition of diasporic existence. By highlighting identity as relational, fragmented, and continuously reconstructed, this study contributes to contemporary postcolonial and diasporic literary scholarship and offers a critical understanding of belonging in transnational fiction.

Keywords: *Belonging, Diaspora, Hybridity, Identity, Postmemory, Third Space, Unhomely.*

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1. Introduction

Migration, displacement, and diaspora have significantly transformed contemporary understandings of identity, home, and belonging. In diasporic contexts, identity is rarely confined to a single national, cultural, or geographical location. Instead, it develops through movement, memory, cultural negotiation, and changing relationships with both homeland and host society. Hall (1990) therefore conceptualizes cultural identity as an ongoing process of becoming rather than a fixed inheritance, while Clifford (1997) emphasizes that diasporic identities are shaped through mobility, displacement, and transnational connections.

Hala Alyan's *The Arsonists' City* (2021) provides a significant literary exploration of these complexities through the Nasr family, whose lives extend across Beirut and the United States. The text engages with migration, war, family memory, intergenerational conflict, cultural dislocation, and uncertain belonging. Beirut functions simultaneously as homeland, memory, trauma, and a site of estrangement, while life in the United States does not produce complete cultural assimilation. The characters therefore occupy unstable positions in which identity and belonging are repeatedly questioned and renegotiated.

1.1. Research Questions

1. How does *The Arsonists' City* (2021) represent the formation of hybrid diasporic identities through Bhabha's concept of the Third Space?
2. How do memory, inherited trauma, and intergenerational conflict shape the characters' negotiations of home, culture, and belonging?
3. How does the text challenge the assumption that assimilation or return to the homeland can provide a stable resolution to diasporic identity?

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Although existing scholarship on diaspora has extensively examined displacement, cultural hybridity, memory, and transnational identity, diasporic experience is still frequently interpreted through binary frameworks such as homeland/hostland, tradition/assimilation, and exile/return. Such approaches may oversimplify the complex representation of identity in *The Arsonists' City* (2021), where the characters neither fully recover an authentic homeland identity nor achieve stable assimilation in the United States. Moreover, although studies of diasporic literature have discussed hybridity and displacement, limited sustained attention has been given to how Alyan's text represents cultural in-betweenness as a continuing condition shaped by memory, intergenerational conflict, inherited trauma, gendered experiences, and failed homecoming. This study therefore addresses the need for a focused analysis of identity as an unfinished process of negotiation rather than a stable cultural achievement.

To investigate this problem, the study employs Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concepts of the Third Space, hybridity, ambivalence, and the unhomely. The Third Space challenges

binary divisions such as East/West, homeland/hostland, and tradition/assimilation by proposing that cultural identities emerge through negotiation within an in-between space. However, Alyan's text also complicates celebratory interpretations of hybridity by demonstrating that cultural in-betweenness can involve emotional fragmentation, linguistic insecurity, inherited trauma, domestic conflict, racial uncertainty, and unsuccessful return. The article therefore argues that the Third Space in *The Arsonists' City* (2021) is not merely a temporary stage between cultures but a persistent condition of diasporic life.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it contributes to contemporary postcolonial and diasporic literary scholarship by offering a focused interpretation of *The Arsonists' City* (2021) through Bhabha's concept of the Third Space. It extends discussions of hybridity by showing that hybrid identity is not always liberating or harmonious but may also involve contradiction, emotional instability, loss, and continuing negotiation. The study further highlights how memory, postmemory, family relationships, gendered expectations, racial positioning, and return to the homeland participate in the construction of diasporic subjectivity.

The study is also important because it contributes to the growing scholarship on contemporary Arab and Middle Eastern diasporic fiction. By examining the Nasr family's transnational experiences between Beirut and the United States, it demonstrates how literature can reveal the complex relationship between personal identity and wider histories of war, migration, racialization, and cultural displacement. Furthermore, the study offers a useful perspective on contemporary debates concerning migration and belonging by showing that identity may remain meaningful without becoming fixed or complete. Accordingly, this article examines diasporic identity as relational, unstable, and continuously reconstructed through memory, intergenerational tensions, domestic estrangement, and return. Rather than presenting assimilation or homecoming as final solutions, Alyan's narrative reveals the persistence of cultural and emotional in-betweenness.

2. Diaspora, Identity, and the Problem of Belonging

Diaspora has frequently been understood through movement, dispersal, attachment to a homeland, and the possibility or desire for return. Such models remain useful, but contemporary cultural criticism has increasingly questioned approaches that treat diasporic identity as a stable relationship between an original home and a foreign destination. Brah (1996), for example, conceptualizes "diaspora space" as a field in which multiple histories, migrations, differences, and power relations intersect. This perspective moves beyond the assumption that only physically displaced individuals participate in diasporic formations.

Instead, diaspora becomes a relational space involving migrants, descendants, host populations, memories, and political histories.

This relational understanding is particularly relevant to *The Arsonists' City* (2021). Members of the Nasr family do not possess identical experiences of Lebanon, America, migration, or cultural inheritance. Generational position changes the meaning of homeland. For those whose memories are grounded in lived experience, Beirut may carry the emotional force of war, youth, family conflict, and loss. For later generations, the same place may be inherited through stories, fragments, visits, language, food, and expectations. Thus, "Lebanese identity" does not remain unchanged as it passes from one generation to another. It is reinterpreted according to new historical and geographical circumstances. Hall's (1990) work provides an important foundation for understanding this process. His account of cultural identity combines shared histories with ongoing transformation. Identity is not simply "being" but also "becoming"; it is produced through representation and historical change. Such a formulation helps explain why the characters in Alyan's text cannot recover a pure identity by returning to Beirut. Their subjectivities have already been transformed by migration, time, family histories, and life elsewhere. The homeland itself has changed as well. Return therefore produces encounter rather than recovery.

Clifford (1997) similarly challenges models that define culture through rootedness alone. His emphasis on routes as well as roots suggests that mobility, travel, translation, and displacement are constitutive of modern identities. In Alyan's text, movement between Beirut and the United States does not merely connect two stable cultural locations. The movement itself becomes identity-forming. Characters carry memories and expectations across borders, encounter changed landscapes, and reinterpret earlier experiences from new positions. Their identities are produced through repeated crossings rather than secured by a final destination. A complementary sociolinguistic perspective is offered by Shaffaqat et al. (2021), who examine linguistic taboos in Ibis Gomes Vega's *Send My Roots Rain*. Their study treats taboo language as socially regulated rather than linguistically neutral, emphasizing that the acceptability of particular expressions depends on cultural norms, communicative context, and community expectations. Drawing on Batistella's theory of bad language, the authors organize taboo expressions into categories such as epithets, profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity. Although their primary concern is linguistic taboo rather than diaspora, their discussion is relevant to the present study because it illustrates how language practices can encode culturally specific boundaries of acceptability and difference, making language another site through which cultural negotiation and belonging may be experienced.

The emotional dimension of this movement is equally important. Ahmed (1999) argues that narratives of migration and estrangement complicate the opposition between home and away. The migrant can feel strange within spaces understood as home and can

develop forms of attachment within spaces once considered foreign. This instability appears throughout *The Arsonists' City* (2021), where proximity does not guarantee belonging. One may be physically inside a family home yet emotionally excluded from its secrets; one may return to Beirut yet encounter distance rather than recognition; one may inhabit the United States while carrying affective attachments to histories elsewhere. The existing conceptual language of diaspora must therefore account for memory and temporal displacement as well as geography. Hirsch's (2008) concept of postmemory is valuable in this respect. Postmemory describes the powerful relationship of later generations to traumatic experiences that preceded their own direct recollection. Such experiences may be transmitted through stories, images, silences, behaviors, and emotional patterns. The later generation "remembers" indirectly, through an inherited imaginative and affective relationship to the past. In Alyan's multigenerational narrative, war and displacement do not disappear when direct witnesses move elsewhere. Their emotional consequences enter family relationships and shape descendants who may not possess the same experiential memories.

Caruth's (1996) work on trauma further clarifies why historical violence may return indirectly, repetitively, or through silence rather than coherent narration. Trauma is not always available as a complete story. It may emerge in interrupted relationships, avoidance, emotional excess, secrecy, or delayed recognition. The Nasr family's history demonstrates how political violence becomes domestic and intergenerational. War is not confined to public historical events; it persists in intimate structures of fear, loss, concealment, and attachment. While these approaches illuminate the text's concern with displacement, this article identifies a particular critical problem. Diasporic hybridity is sometimes described in language that risks overemphasizing flexibility, creativity, and liberation. Alyan's narrative resists such optimism. Hybrid identity may enable cultural adaptation, but it may also generate exhaustion, insecurity, and exclusion from multiple communities. The characters' ability to negotiate different cultural contexts does not eliminate the pain of incomplete belonging. This tension creates a need to revisit Bhabha's Third Space while paying attention to its emotional and political limits.

The research gap addressed here therefore concerns the relationship between cultural negotiation and enduring non-resolution. Rather than asking only how hybrid identity emerges, this article asks what happens when hybridity itself becomes a continuing condition from which there is no final movement into stable belonging. It examines how Alyan's text situates such non-resolution within family life, memory, gender, racial positioning, domestic space, and the experience of return. In doing so, the article moves from a general account of cultural hybridity toward an analysis of what may be called the permanence of in-betweenness.

3. Theoretical Framework: Third Space, Hybridity, Ambivalence, and the Unhomely

The primary theoretical framework of this study is derived from Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha's intervention is significant because it destabilizes the assumption that cultures exist as internally unified and clearly separated entities. When cultures meet, their interaction cannot be adequately described as a simple exchange between two complete systems. Meaning is produced through enunciation, translation, negotiation, and difference. The Third Space names this interstitial field of cultural production. For the present study, the Third Space is understood in three related ways. First, it is a site of identity formation. The diasporic subject is neither reducible to an unchanged homeland identity nor fully absorbed into the host society. Identity emerges through negotiation across cultural demands. Second, the Third Space is a site of ambivalence. Because cultural meanings are unstable, the subject may experience contradictory attachments without resolving them into a unified self. Third, the Third Space is a site structured by power. Not all subjects negotiate difference from equal positions, and factors such as gender, race, generation, and historical violence shape the possibilities of cultural articulation.

Hybridity is central to this framework. In Bhabha's (1994) account, hybridity challenges the authority of claims to cultural purity. The hybrid does not merely combine two original identities. Rather, cultural interaction transforms the terms being combined and reveals that identity was never completely self-contained. Applied to *The Arsonists' City* (2021), this perspective directs attention away from the question of whether characters are "more Lebanese" or "more American." The more important question concerns how these categories are negotiated, performed, remembered, challenged, and altered in particular situations. However, this study does not treat hybridity as inherently emancipatory. The text repeatedly reveals what might be called the affective cost of cultural negotiation. A subject may be capable of moving between cultural codes while simultaneously feeling insufficient in each. Language may connect generations while exposing linguistic loss. Return may provide contact with the homeland while confirming estrangement. Family memory may sustain cultural continuity while transmitting trauma. Hybridity therefore operates through ambivalence.

Ambivalence describes the coexistence of contradictory desires and attachments. For diasporic subjects, home may be simultaneously loved and resented; cultural tradition may be preserved and resisted; assimilation may be desired and feared. The first major passage selected from the thesis analysis captures this contradiction in relation to Beirut: "Selling the only thing on Arab soil that still belongs to us? My parents' house is gone. Much as I hate that goddamn city, Beirut's all we have left" (Alyan, 2021, p. 33). The statement refuses a simple emotional position. Hatred and attachment coexist. Beirut is not

idealized, yet its possible loss is experienced as existentially threatening. The city functions not as a stable origin but as a contradictory sign of belonging.

The concept of the unhomely further expands the framework. For Bhabha (1994), the unhomely emerges when the division between private home and public world is disturbed. Wider political and historical forces enter intimate life, making the familiar strange. In diasporic narratives, the house may contain memories of war, migration, secrecy, and displacement. It can no longer be treated as an isolated refuge from history. This idea resonates with Blunt and Dowling's (2006) understanding of home as a spatial and imaginative construction rather than a purely physical dwelling. A house becomes home through relationships, memories, practices, exclusions, and power. In *The Arsonists' City* (2021), domestic spaces are repeatedly unstable because family members do not share one coherent narrative of the past. The household therefore becomes a major site of cultural and intergenerational negotiation.

The framework is complemented by Brah's (1996) attention to gendered and racialized power within diaspora. The Third Space should not be imagined as neutral territory. Women may encounter different pressures concerning respectability, sexuality, family obligation, or cultural authenticity. Similarly, Arab and Middle Eastern identities in the United States may be shaped by changing forms of visibility and classification. Awad et al. (2021) demonstrate the complexity of ethnic and racial self-labeling among Americans of Arab or Middle Eastern and North African descent, while Alsultany (2012) shows how Arab and Muslim identities are mediated by post-9/11 racial and representational structures. These perspectives help situate the text's cultural negotiations within broader questions of power. The theoretical framework therefore combines Third Space, hybridity, ambivalence, and the unhomely without assuming that cultural fluidity automatically produces freedom. The argument developed below is that Alyan turns the Third Space into a permanent and emotionally charged condition: a space in which identity remains possible, but never final.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and theory-driven methodology grounded in postcolonial literary criticism. Its primary text is Alyan's *The Arsonists' City* (2021). The text was selected because its multigenerational structure, transnational settings, and recurring concerns with migration, war, family memory, race, language, and belonging make it particularly suitable for an analysis of diasporic identity. Close textual analysis constitutes the principal method. The reading process focuses on characterization, dialogue, narrative structure, spatial imagery, family relationships, memory, linguistic negotiation, and representations of return. Rather than attempting to discuss every event in the text, the analysis identifies recurrent patterns that illuminate the research questions.

The textual material is organized into five interconnected analytical themes: (1) fragmented belonging and the persistence of the Third Space; (2) memory, trauma, and intergenerational inheritance; (3) domestic unhomeliness and family secrecy; (4) gendered and racialized negotiations of belonging; and (5) return and the failure of restorative homecoming. These themes condense the larger thesis analysis into a focused article structure. Multiple readings inform the interpretation. An initial reading establishes narrative and thematic patterns. Subsequent readings examine moments of hybridity, ambivalence, cultural translation, and unhomeliness through Bhabha's framework. A final interpretive stage relates textual patterns to wider scholarship on diaspora, identity, trauma, memory, gender, and racial positioning. The study remains a literary analysis and does not claim to provide an empirical account of actual diasporic communities.

5. Analysis and Discussion

This section examines how *The Arsonists' City* (2021) represents diasporic identity as fragmented, relational, and continuously negotiated. Through the Nasr family's movements between Beirut and the United States, Alyan challenges the idea that identity can be secured through either assimilation or return. Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) concepts of the Third Space, hybridity, ambivalence, and the unhomely, the analysis focuses on five interconnected dimensions: fragmented belonging, memory and inherited trauma, domestic estrangement, gendered and racialized negotiation, and failed homecoming.

5.1. Fragmented Belonging and the Third Space as a Persistent Condition

A central concern of *The Arsonists' City* (2021) is the instability of diasporic belonging. The Nasr family does not retain an unchanged Lebanese identity, nor does life in the United States result in complete assimilation. Instead, identity is repeatedly reconstructed through movement, family relationships, memory, and cultural contradiction. This condition is captured in the statement: "Much as I hate that goddamn city, Beirut's all we have left" (Alyan, 2021, p. 33). The passage combines rejection and attachment within a single emotional position. Beirut is resented, yet it remains symbolically indispensable. From Bhabha's (1994) perspective, such contradiction reflects the Third Space, where identity emerges through negotiation rather than fixed cultural origin. The character cannot simply choose between Lebanon and America because each location has already shaped the meaning of the other. Beirut is understood through displacement, while life in the United States remains affected by memories and inherited attachments to Lebanon.

The text therefore presents hybridity not as the peaceful combination of two cultures but as a continuing state of negotiation. Hall's (1990) understanding of identity as a process of "becoming" is particularly relevant because the characters repeatedly reinterpret who they are according to changing circumstances. Their identities vary across generations, locations, and relationships. What it means to be Lebanese, American, Arab,

migrant, parent, or child changes depending on context. Alyan also complicates optimistic interpretations of hybridity. Cultural flexibility may provide the ability to move between different environments, yet it can produce insecurity and emotional exhaustion. The characters often experience themselves as insufficiently authentic in more than one context. They may appear too American in Beirut and yet remain culturally marked within the United States. Their identities are therefore neither completely rooted nor entirely detached.

The Third Space in the text is significant because it is not temporary. The characters do not pass through cultural uncertainty before reaching a final resolution. Settlement abroad does not end displacement, and return to Beirut does not restore an original self. Instead, each movement generates further negotiation. The text consequently presents in-betweenness as a persistent condition of diasporic life. This does not mean that the characters lack identity. Rather, their identities are relational and unfinished. They belong through multiple attachments that may conflict with one another. Alyan thus challenges essentialist assumptions that belonging must be singular, territorially fixed, or culturally pure.

5.2. Memory, Postmemory, and the Inheritance of Trauma

Memory is another major space through which diasporic identity is formed. In the text, the past is neither completely absent nor directly recoverable. It returns through family stories, silences, grief, objects, emotional reactions, and recurring memories. For this reason, memory itself functions as a kind of Third Space between historical experience and present identity. The multigenerational structure of the text shows that members of the Nasr family relate differently to Lebanon and its history. Older family members possess direct memories of war, displacement, and Beirut, whereas later generations often inherit these experiences indirectly. Hirsch's (2008) concept of postmemory helps explain this process. Later generations may not personally remember traumatic events, yet the emotional consequences of those events shape their identities through family narratives, absences, and inherited fears.

Alyan demonstrates that what is not spoken can be as influential as what is openly remembered. Family secrets and incomplete histories create uncertainty for younger generations, who must construct meaning from fragments. As a result, cultural inheritance is never transparent. The descendants receive not a complete account of the past but partial narratives that must be repeatedly interpreted. The importance of transmitted memory appears in the passage describing packages that arrive around "Eid and the new year and my birthday," containing "fruit and chocolates and the most beautiful tatrız" (Alyan, 2021, p. 403). These objects establish connection across geographical separation. The package carries affection, cultural practice, and remembrance into another location. Heritage

therefore survives through repeated acts rather than through physical residence in the homeland alone.

At the same time, the act of sending objects confirms distance. The cultural item crosses borders because family members are separated. This dual function reflects diasporic ambivalence: the object connects and reminds the recipient of separation simultaneously. Memory is therefore neither pure preservation nor complete loss. Trauma operates through a similar pattern. Caruth (1996) argues that trauma may return indirectly through repetition, silence, emotional rupture, or delayed understanding. In Alyan's text, the effects of war persist within family relationships long after geographical movement. Historical violence becomes domestic and intergenerational.

This dynamic is visible when formal distance suddenly collapses into grief: "'Thank you, habibti,' she says formally, as though Ava is a stranger, but when her daughter hugs her, she bursts into tears again" (Alyan, 2021, p. 383). The scene combines cultural intimacy, emotional estrangement, and physical closeness. The affectionate Arabic term "habibti" suggests connection, yet the formal tone creates distance. The embrace then interrupts this emotional control. Such moments reveal that the past is not simply remembered; it is embodied in present relationships. Trauma shapes how family members speak, withdraw, attach, and grieve. Memory therefore becomes central to identity because the characters continuously negotiate between what was experienced, what was inherited, and what remains unsaid.

5.3. The Unhomely House: Domestic Space, Secrets, and Alienation

Alyan also challenges the conventional assumption that home provides security against displacement. In *The Arsonists' City* (2021), domestic spaces often reproduce uncertainty, secrecy, and emotional alienation. The house may gather family members physically while exposing how little they understand one another. This condition is clearly expressed in Ava's reflection: "This whole summer, we've been sleeping under the same roof, but it feels like we're all lying" (Alyan, 2021, p. 389). The phrase "under the same roof" conventionally suggests unity, but here it emphasizes estrangement. Shared domestic space does not guarantee emotional belonging. Bhabha's (1994) concept of the unhomely is useful in interpreting this tension. The unhomely occurs when the boundary between private life and wider historical forces becomes unstable. In the Nasr family, the effects of war, migration, displacement, secrecy, and unresolved memories enter intimate relationships. The home therefore cannot remain separate from public history. Ava's realization that she does not truly know the people around her also reveals the fragmented transmission of family history. Parents conceal parts of the past, family members maintain secrets, and younger generations must interpret incomplete information. The family becomes both a source of identity and a site of uncertainty.

The Beirut house carries similar symbolic importance. It is more than physical property; it represents ancestry, memory, continuity, and contested belonging. The debate about selling it reveals the desire to maintain a material connection to Lebanon. Yet possession of the house cannot restore an unchanged past. The city, family, and individuals have all been transformed. The home thus becomes a palimpsest of overlapping histories. Different generations attach different meanings to it, and no single interpretation becomes authoritative. Alyan shows that diasporic identity is negotiated not only at borders or in public institutions but also within kitchens, bedrooms, family conversations, and silences. Domestic space is therefore one of the text's most important Third Spaces.

5.4. Gender, Race, and Unequal Access to Belonging

Although hybridity challenges fixed identity, Alyan demonstrates that cultural negotiation does not occur under equal conditions. Gender, race, generation, and historical circumstances influence how characters experience belonging. The Third Space is therefore not a neutral location of unlimited freedom. Brah (1996) emphasizes that diaspora is structured by intersecting relations of difference and power. This insight is relevant to the women in Alyan's text, who frequently negotiate family expectations, emotional labor, sexuality, respectability, and cultural obligation. Migration does not automatically remove patriarchal pressures. In some cases, women become especially responsible for preserving family relationships and cultural continuity. The female characters therefore experience hybridity differently from male characters. Their self-presentation may require greater adjustment according to family and social expectations. Cultural negotiation can involve strategic silence, emotional control, or modification of behavior. Such flexibility may be necessary for survival, but it should not automatically be interpreted as liberation.

Race further complicates belonging in the United States. Arab and Middle Eastern identities do not occupy a simple or fixed position within American racial categories. Awad et al. (2021) show that racial and ethnic self-identification among Arab and MENA communities is complex and context-dependent. This instability reflects the text's broader concern with conditional belonging. The Nasr family's relationship to American identity cannot therefore be understood solely as a question of cultural assimilation. External perceptions, political history, and racialization influence how subjects are recognized. Alsultany (2012) demonstrates that Arab and Muslim identities in the United States have been shaped by post-9/11 security discourse and media representation. This context makes belonging historically unstable.

Alyan's narrative consequently reveals that subjects may be included in one situation and marked as different in another. The characters continuously negotiate not only who they believe themselves to be but also how others classify them. The Third Space is therefore shaped by unequal relations of recognition. Gender and race complicate

celebratory accounts of hybridity because they demonstrate that constant adaptation can become burdensome. The characters may need to adjust language, behavior, or self-presentation according to changing expectations. Belonging becomes conditional rather than secure. Alyan therefore presents identity negotiation as both a creative possibility and a form of continuous labor.

5.5. Return, Failed Homecoming, and the Impossibility of Recovery

The return to Beirut provides the text's most powerful challenge to the assumption that the homeland can restore stable identity. In many conventional diaspora narratives, return promises reunion with an authentic origin. Alyan rejects this expectation by showing that neither the homeland nor the returning subject remains unchanged. The difficulty of return is therefore temporal as well as geographical. The characters do not return to the Beirut preserved in memory. The city has undergone political, social, and physical transformations, while the returning subjects have themselves been changed by migration and life elsewhere. Homecoming becomes an encounter between altered identities.

Ahmed's (1999) discussion of estrangement helps explain why familiarity can produce alienation. A diasporic subject may recognize a place yet feel displaced within it. In the text, emotional attachment to Beirut does not guarantee cultural ease or complete recognition. Return can intensify awareness of distance. The earlier statement that Beirut is both hated and "all we have left" demonstrates this contradiction. The homeland remains symbolically powerful, but that power does not depend on harmonious attachment. It derives partly from loss, memory, and the fear that selling the family property would remove one of the last material links to an inherited past. Boym's (2001) work on nostalgia further clarifies the impossibility of complete recovery. What the characters desire is not simply a geographical place but an earlier arrangement of relationships, memories, family structures, and possibilities. Such a past cannot be restored through physical movement. From Bhabha's (1994) perspective, return becomes another Third Space encounter rather than an escape from hybridity. The returning subject brings changed habits, memories, languages, and experiences into the homeland. As a result, return generates new negotiations rather than restoring a pure identity.

This finding supports the article's central argument that the Third Space in *The Arsonists' City* (2021) is persistent. Assimilation does not end cultural in-betweenness, while homecoming does not eliminate it. Every attempt to secure belonging produces additional contradictions. The text therefore replaces the question of where the characters "truly" belong with a more complex examination of how belonging is repeatedly created and interrupted. The characters are not entirely rootless; they maintain strong attachments to family, memory, language, objects, and place. However, these attachments are multiple and sometimes contradictory. Alyan ultimately presents diasporic identity as an unfinished

process. Home cannot be fully recovered because it is continually transformed by time, memory, migration, and personal change. The failure of return is therefore not simply a personal tragedy but a critique of essentialist ideas of identity. The text demonstrates that belonging remains meaningful even when it is incomplete, and that the diasporic subject exists through continuous negotiation rather than final cultural resolution.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the representation of identity, hybridity, and belonging in Alyan's *The Arsonists' City* (2021) through the primary theoretical lens of Bhabha's Third Space. The analysis demonstrates that the text rejects fixed and essentialist understandings of cultural identity. The Nasr family's transnational existence between Beirut and the United States produces subjectivities formed through migration, memory, family conflict, cultural translation, racial positioning, gendered expectations, and historical disruption. The first major finding is that diasporic identity in the text remains fragmented and unfinished. This fragmentation should not be understood as the simple absence of identity. Rather, it reflects a continuing process of negotiation. The characters cannot be adequately classified through a binary opposition between Lebanese and American identity because each position is internally unstable and transformed through interaction with the other.

The second finding concerns the theoretical status of the Third Space. In Alyan's narrative, the Third Space is not merely a temporary passage between cultures. The characters do not move through in-betweenness toward final assimilation, nor do they overcome hybridity through successful return. Instead, the Third Space becomes a persistent condition. Identity remains open because each apparent solution produces further negotiation. The third finding is that memory functions as an important Third Space. The past is not recovered in a pure form but reconstructed through present circumstances. For later generations, postmemory makes inherited history emotionally powerful despite the absence of direct experience. War, displacement, and loss therefore continue to shape identity through family stories, silences, emotional reactions, and repeated practices.

The fourth finding concerns domestic unhomeliness. Alyan destabilizes the assumption that home provides a secure alternative to exile. The family house becomes a site of secrecy, alienation, contested memory, and unresolved history. Wider political forces penetrate private relationships, while family members living under the same roof may remain strangers to one another. The domestic sphere thus becomes one of the text's most important sites of identity negotiation. The fifth finding is that cultural hybridity is structured by unequal power. Gender affects the forms of freedom, emotional labor, cultural responsibility, and self-monitoring available to different characters. Racial positioning likewise complicates belonging in the United States, where Arab and Middle

Eastern identities may be differently classified and perceived according to historical and political contexts. The Third Space is therefore not neutral.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates that return to Beirut dismantles the fantasy of restorative homecoming. Physical return cannot reunite the subject with an unchanged homeland because memory, place, and identity have all been transformed by time. Return exposes the difference between inherited or remembered homeland and present reality. Instead of resolving diaspora, it intensifies awareness of in-betweenness. These findings suggest that Alyan's representation of hybridity is both critical and affective. The text supports postcolonial challenges to cultural purity while simultaneously foregrounding the emotional costs of non-fixity. Hybridity enables new identities, relationships, and forms of cultural translation, but it can also produce grief, uncertainty, and the exhausting demand for constant adjustment. The article therefore concludes that *The Arsonists' City* (2021) offers a significant intervention in contemporary diasporic fiction by presenting belonging as a provisional relationship rather than a permanent possession. Home is not simply inherited, lost, or recovered. It is repeatedly created through memory, family, language, objects, relationships, and movement. Yet each creation remains vulnerable to historical change and interpersonal conflict.

By conceptualizing the Third Space as a continuing condition rather than a temporary transitional stage, this reading extends the significance of Bhabha's framework for contemporary diasporic literature. Alyan's characters inhabit neither a culturally empty space nor a harmonious synthesis. They live through an unfinished process of becoming in which identity is sustained by contradiction. The text's deepest insight is therefore that belonging may remain meaningful precisely because it is never complete.

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