
RESEARCH ARTICLE

“I Wish I Hadn’t Returned Here”: Homecoming as a Form of Exile in Sahar Khalifeh’s *The Inheritance*

Shahad Alfaqih¹ ✉ and Dr. Banan AlJahdali²

¹Masters Student, Department of English, College of Languages and Translation, University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Languages and Translation, University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Shahad Alfaqih, **E-mail:** salfaqih0012.stu@uj.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the different forms of exile lived by four characters in Sahar Khalifeh’s *The Inheritance* (2005). The study traces four Palestinian characters - Zayna/Zaynab, Nahleh, Kamal, and Mazen - from their exile until they return to their homeland, suggesting that their homecoming or return was a form of exile. By relying on postcolonial studies and Edward Said’s theorization of exile in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, this article delves into the struggles of exilic characters, their ways of compensating for their loss of home, and the different reasons behind their exile and return.

KEYWORDS

Exile, Homecoming, Postcolonialism, Palestinian Literature.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 02 November 2024

PUBLISHED: 11 November 2024

DOI: 10.32996/jhsss.2024.6.11.5

1. Introduction

Exile is a word that has a special meaning to Palestinians, evoking the pain and sorrow of millions of Palestinians who were expelled from their homes by force. Exile is one of the main themes of Palestinian narratives describing the dislocation, alienation, and estrangement caused by the Israeli Occupation (Priyanka, 2018, p. 120). The historical beginning of exile narratives in Palestinian literature dates back to 1948, or what is known as the year of Nakba (catastrophe). Such narratives depict the loss of a home to which the authors and/or characters cannot return (Michael, 2007, p. 4). According to Almarhabi (2020), narratives of return or homecoming were foregrounded almost twenty years later, in 1967, when the Palestinian liberation movement emerged, as Palestinian writers in the diaspora and within the occupied territories were advised to tackle the issue of return in their works (p. 88). This article delves into the ramifications of return experienced by the exilic characters in Sahar Khalifeh’s novel *The Inheritance*.

Palestinian writers have demonstrated different kinds of homecoming or exile narratives; for instance, the Palestinian critic Adel Osta suggests that narratives of return among Palestinian writers in the diaspora are considered optimistic, while narratives of Palestinian writers within the occupied territories have depicted return as a disappointment (Osta, as cited in Almarhabi, 2020, p. 88). Accordingly, Sahar Khalifeh, who lives within the occupied territories, problematizes the exile’s return in *The Inheritance*. Khalifeh narrates multilayered and individualistic experiences of homecoming and exile, which may suggest that return might not bring salvation (Priyanka, 2018, p. 144).

This article traces the lives of four characters in *The Inheritance*, from their exile to their return, discussing the different and complex experiences of exile and homecoming as portrayed in the novel and suggesting that return might be as difficult and severe an event as exile. Edward Said’s theorization of exile in his book *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* will be used to investigate the complexities surrounding the nature of exile and return for each character in *The Inheritance*.

2. Literature Review

After Nakba in 1948, exile and return became central themes in Palestinian literature; Almarhabi (2020) states that post-Nakba Palestinian literature focuses on the alienation and estrangement of losing one's roots and home (p. 77). In her thesis on pre- and post-Nakba Palestinian literature, "Identity in Palestinian Literature: Exile Is the Antithesis of Home," Michael (2007) examines exile, as opposed to home, as the main theme in Palestinian literature for those writers and poets who were expelled from their homeland after Nakba (p. 2). Furthermore, Korel's (2013) "Representations of Exile in Palestinian Fiction" attempts to divide these exilic representations within Palestinian literature into two waves. The first wave incorporates crucial political events that played a major role in shaping Palestinian history, such as the Six-Day War, in which representations of Palestine before and after the Israeli occupation are romanticized. Unlike the first wave, the second wave representations disregard the political events that took place in the past, and they forsake the romanticization of Palestine. This tension of representations among exile writers suggests the complexity and multifaceted nature of exile (Korel, 2013, p. 21).

Among the writers who delve into the complexity of exile in their work is Sahar Khalifeh. In her inclusive thesis on the effects of exile on women and men in Khalifeh's novels, Priyanka (2018) discusses Khalifeh's depictions of the troublesome nature of exile and the issues it provokes, such as homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and longing for return (p. 36). From a settler-colonial perspective, Priyanka maintains that Khalifeh's *The Inheritance* explores different experiences of exile that reflect its diversity and intricate nature. Priyanka concludes that Khalifeh's writings seek to defy the simplistic representations of exile and seek to promote the need to look at exile from different perspectives and contexts (p. 150).

Another prominent theme in Khalifeh's works is homecoming, or the return of the exile. Return in *The Inheritance* is problematized, such that returning home might not be an alternative to exile (Priyanka, p. 148). Hall (1987) notes in his article "Minimal Selves" that exile and migration are "a one-way trip" (p. 44) and that return, therefore, might not be possible. In the same vein, in their study "Homecoming as Displacement: An Analysis from the Perspective of Returning Social Scientists," Bielsa et al. (2014) argue that homecoming is an unsettling process since returnees not only have to adapt to a place that used to be familiar but also must encounter the newness of their home (p. 66). Furthermore, Lombardozzi (2007) expands upon the complexity of homecoming by asserting that it might not be a good solution for the exile since the "once known homeland" can be different from the returnee (p. 15).

Khalifeh's works focus on examining the atrocities faced by the exile upon his/her return. In her thesis discussing Khalifeh's novel *Wild Thorns* from a feminist postcolonial perspective, Curry (2021) detects the confusion and sorrow that the protagonist feels upon his return due to the enormous changes that took place during his absence (p. 36) in the same vein, Khalifeh's *The Inheritance* offers a similar problem regarding the return of the exile. In her study, Priyanka analyzes the difficulties exiles face after their return to their homes. She argues that Khalifeh, by complicating homecoming, is suggesting the hopelessness of healing the wounds of exile by returning home (Curry, 2020, p. 144). Thus, the problematization of the exile's homecoming, this article argues, is one of Khalifeh's main objectives in her works.

Most previous studies of Khalifeh are concerned with examining her portrayals of Israeli Occupation and the different depictions of exile. Moreover, with the exception of Priyanka, few have discussed the themes of exile and return and the complexity associated with those themes in *The Inheritance*. These studies have not reflected on the dissimilar nature of exile among the four characters of *The Inheritance*, nor have they deliberated on the similarity of the characters' fates after their return home. Thus, this article builds on Priyanka's analysis, suggesting that the return of the exilic characters to their homes in *The Inheritance* is not truly a return but a new exile. Furthermore, this article proposes new interpretations of Zayna/Zaynab, Nahleh, Kamal, and Mazen in exile by relying on Edward Said's theorization of exile in his book *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*.

3. Methodology

This article examines themes of exile and returns within Palestinian literature in general and *The Inheritance* in particular, from the perspective of Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (2000), in which he theorizes the Palestinian exile as a theoretical framework. Said maintains that exile is not "a matter of choice; you are born into it, or it happens to you" (p. 189). Said acknowledges the exceptional exile of Palestinians as "hav[ing] been exiled by exiles" (p. 184) since the Palestinians were expelled by the Jews, who have experienced a long history of exile themselves. Thus, the Palestinian exile is ironic while also being an example of the mindless repetition of historical atrocities.

Since Said was a Palestinian exile himself, he knew what exile felt and looked like. He defines exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (p. 180). Said fixates on the destructive nature of exile, arguing that it causes a "rift" between the self and its home or familiarity and noting that "its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (p. 180). Once exile happens, there is no turning back, and its nature remains permanently with the person who has lost his/her home.

Moreover, since the exile lives constantly with a sense of loss, Said argues that the exile compensates for his/her lost home by creating an alternative world to rule (p. 187) and thus distracts themselves from the gruesome nature of exile. Since the return depicted in *The Inheritance* is itself another form of exile, this article takes Said's theorization of exile as a point from which to understand the different attitudes of Zayna/Zaynab, Nahleh, Kamal, and Mazen in their experiences of exile.

4. Discussion

Sahar Khalifeh's *The Inheritance* (2005) addresses the sophisticated nature of exile and suggests that it may not necessarily be such an odious experience. On the contrary, it is the homecoming of the yearning exile that might be an awful and unpleasant experience. Khalifeh's depiction of homecoming as disappointing goes somewhat against the grain since exiles are mostly portrayed in Palestinian literature as people who are longing to return to their home countries. Therefore, each of the exilic characters, Zayna/Zaynab, Nahleh, Kamal, and Mazen, experiences exile in a unique way, yet their return home is conceived as another form of exile. Thus, Khalifeh is proposing a sophisticated lens through which we can see the Palestinian experience of exile and homecoming in an alternative way that defies the simplicity of exile and homecoming narratives.

The Inheritance (2005) tells the story of Zayna, also called Zaynab, who receives a letter from her uncle Abu Jaber Hamdan to book a flight from Washington to Palestine in order not to lose the claim to her father's inheritance. Although this is the main story of the novel, this article focuses on the alienation Zayna/Zaynab feels after moving with her American grandmother due to her premarital pregnancy. Her two names cast light on the complexity of living in two different cultures. Zayna/Zaynab grows up in New York City listening to her Palestinian father's stories about Jerusalem and Palestinian society while he wanders the streets of New York to attract customers to buy his merchandise. However, after she becomes pregnant at the age of fifteen due to a random encounter, her father threatens her life, and her grandmother intervenes to offer her shelter. After moving from her father's house to her grandmother's house, Zayna/Zaynab starts to experience feelings of alienation and displacement.

After moving to her grandmother's house in Washington, Zayna/Zaynab feels like an exile as she deals with both Palestinian and American cultures. She acknowledges this duality when she says, "I was caught between two languages and two cultures – my father's Brooklyn and the West Bank on one side and my maternal grandmother's American culture on the other. I was later left without any culture and lived in a vacuum" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 9). She is experiencing exile, which Said defines as an unhealable rift between the self and its true home. This feeling of loss is reinforced in her two names, Zayna and Zaynab; the latter is her original Arabic name, used by her father, while the former is the Americanized version of her name: "My name and address followed suit. My original name was Zaynab Hamdan, and with time it became Zayna" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 8). Therefore, even her own name, which is part of her identity, has changed, and with this change comes a sense of confusion.

Zayna/Zaynab is "extremely homesick and longed for my past" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 33) and the life she had with her father in New York. For her, home was New York, not Washington. Thus, she decides to return to New York or her home to resolve these feelings; however, she finds that "[e]verything was different, everything had changed" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 33), and her home is no longer the same. This sense of difference recalls Zahia Salhi's (2006) statement that exiles "keep an idealized image of home as a paradise they were forced to flee" (p. 3). Zayna/Zaynab kept an idealized memory of her home in New York that shattered after her arrival; she finally confesses, "I had lost my father. I didn't know where they were [her family] or what I could do now" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 41). Everything has changed, and even the thought of meeting her father again vanished upon her arrival. Home is no longer the paradise to which she wished to return; instead, it has become yet another exile. This is what Said (2000) refers to as the impossibility of surmounting the sadness of exile or the inability to return.

Another character in *The Inheritance* (2005) who ends up living another exile upon her return is Zayna/Zaynab's cousin Nahleh, who left Palestine when she was eighteen to make a living in Kuwait as a teacher. She remains in exile for almost thirty years to pay off her family's debt and to support her brothers' education in Palestine and devotes so much of her time to her work that she has neither a husband nor a child. Nahleh realizes the gruesome reality of her life as she tells Zayna/Zaynab, "[b]ut one year followed another, claiming a good part of my life. It is slipping away. I suddenly realized this and woke up to find myself old, with many years lost. I woke up and found myself old, without a husband, without a house, and no one to call me Mama" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 74). Nahleh, the independent and successful woman who was the main provider of her family, describes how her years in exile have slipped away unnoticed, leaving her in awe and shock about how exile stole her youth, marital life, and offspring. Therefore, for her, exile is the reason behind all these unfortunate events, and returning home might compensate for her loss.

After returning from her tiresome exile to Wadi-al-Rihan, Nahleh faces a different reality from what she expected. The family she had provided for almost thirty years turned a blind eye on her after she returned. None of her brothers, whom she funded their education, showed any sign of gratitude to her. She exclaims to Zayna/Zaynab, who lent an ear to her:

Is that what I get in life, is this what I spent my youth for living in exile! Is this why I gave him [Mazen, her brother] hard-earned money and sweated in Kuwait! Is this what I end up with? He and they [her family], all of them. All squeezed me like a lemon and then left me behind. (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 72)

Nahleh cannot fathom how her efforts and sacrifices have gone unnoticed. She furiously asks if her family's awful treatment is what she deserves after spending years in exile. Furthermore, she wishes that "Kuwait had remained what it was and I [Nahleh] hadn't returned here" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 227). The intensity of her feelings about her return to Palestine demonstrates the extreme estrangement she feels at home, which has become even more alien than her original exile, Kuwait. Said (2000) emphasizes that exile is not a matter of choice; it happens by force, and there is no escape from it (p. 189). Nahleh cannot escape her exilic fate; although she first regarded Kuwait as her place of exile, she came to realize that Palestine, her only home, has become a place of exile to her, too.

To cope with her new exile, Nahleh starts hunting for a husband to compensate for her long years of singlehood in Kuwait. This calls back to Said's (2000) concept of compensating for the exile's loss by producing a new world, or as Zayna/Zaynab describes the case of Nahleh, "a solution that would save her from... the reality of a fifty-year-old woman" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 104). Nahleh, therefore, embarks on a mission to find herself a husband and create an alternate reality for herself by spending her time "trying new clothes in front of the mirror, exercising to lose weight and listening to songs by...Umm Kulthum" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 104). This new behavior leads Nahleh's family to question her sanity. Her father worries that "Nahleh has changed...she has become cruel and stubborn and says strange things. She even wears strange clothes, laughs loudly, and chew gum!" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 103). The dramatic change in her personality highlights the severe alienation she feels in her new state of exile; instead of feeling settled, she feels as though she is a stranger in her own home.

Another example of exile is Nahleh's older brother, Kamal, the engineer, who returned from his voluntary exile in Germany and questioned his decision to return. Kamal returned to achieve two things: "[h]e wanted to forget his life in exile," and "he wanted to do the right thing" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 116). By the time of his return, Kamal wants to erase his memories of years in exile, and he wants to help his country, Palestine, by building a sewage factory. Kamal tells his father about the horrific reality in Germany as a place where "everyone was by himself, an isolated, forgotten island. Except for your wife and children, you have nothing to count on...but your work" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 221). Exile for Kamal was painful loneliness: he despises the individualism of German culture that is so different from Palestinian culture. He even wrote to his father that he wished to return home, yet his father pressed him to stay since there was no future in Palestine.

When Kamal finally makes it home, he embarks on his sewage project; yet, when the natives hear of his new project, they start to question its validity and bizarre nature. To them, the project is a foreign idea of little value: "Is this what he [Kamal] brought from overseas, from Germany? A recycling and sewage factory?" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 144). They wonder if this is the best idea he could come up with after years of living overseas. Other people's chatter about his new project is not enough, as the Wadi-al-Rihan municipality refuses to give him a permit to start his factory. This complex situation leaves Kamal puzzled: "The German-educated engineer truly did not understand the way things worked over here and what knowledge meant" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 143). Kamal is perplexed by the reactions to his project because he sees it as a contribution to his homeland, while others see him as just a German, as a foreigner who is projecting Western culture onto them.

After Kamal's project partner Abu Salem becomes involved with his sister Nahleh in a risky affair that leads to her kidnapping, and his attempts to bring about change in his land and pull his people out of their bad state fail, Kamal returns to his former exile in Germany, deciding he does not belong either there or in his home of Palestine. Said (2000) refers to this state of not belonging anywhere as "orphanhood" (p. 187), in which exiles always feel their difference from their environment, no matter where they go. Thus, the home that Kamal had craved all his years in Germany turned out to be another exile, another estrangement.

The last exilic character in *The Inheritance* (2005) is Mazen, who returned to Wadi-al-Rihan after losing both his home and his lover Salma in the 1982 Lebanon War. These two painful memories, the loss of Beirut and of his love, have made him a careless person who "moves from one girl to another, between friends and cafés" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 100). Mazen is compensating for his loss in the war by dating different girls and socializing with different people. He does not have a job or, a wife, or even a car; according to his father, "he produces nothing but words, he talks about politics, but says nothing about his worries" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 100). Mazen, as Said suggests about exiles, is compensating for his unfortunate loss by indulging in such activities to distract himself from his severe reality.

Yet, all of Mazen's attempts at distraction fail when he finally comes to his senses and realizes that Wadi-al-Rihan is a place of exile, a prison that confines his soul, and his true home was Lebanon: "After Beirut and its lights came Wadi al-Rihan! This prison called Wadi al-Rihan...those people, the misery and the backwardness of Wadi al-Rihan. My soul is there [Beirut], I was there, how

did I get here?" (Khalifeh, 2005, p. 140). The deterioration of the political situation in Palestine after the Lebanon war and his painful loss have made his home seem foreign and alien to him. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), Said suggests that Palestinians cannot be in Palestine because, to them, it does not exist anymore (p. 11). For Mazen, Palestine no longer exists after the Lebanon war; thus, what was once his home is now a place of exile, and Beirut, where he lost his lover, has become his true home.

5. Conclusion

In *The Inheritance* (2005), Khalifeh problematizes the homecoming of the exile. Her depiction of return as a disheartening event suggests that home does not mark the end of exile but its continuation. Zayna/Zaynab, Nahleh, Kamal, and Mazen all experience different settings of exile and return, but they all come to realize that the home they longed for while in exile is unattainable and is thus yet another form of exile. Their encounters with the continuity of exile demonstrate the validity of Said's claims about the impossibility of homecoming. Moreover, almost all of the exilic characters in Khalifeh's novel engage in processes of compensation for the loss of their homes: Zayna/Zaynab focuses on her academic life, Nahleh starts to look for a husband, Kamal tries to build a sewage company, and Mazen immerses himself in dating and talking about politics.

Through her characters, Khalifeh reflects on the marginalized complexity of exile and homecoming within the Palestinian context. Her objective in *The Inheritance* is to propose that homecoming might be worse than exile: the exile thinks that home is the final destination to compensate for the horrors of exile, but *The Inheritance* offers a different story of exile and return. Losing what once used to be a place of familiarity, memories, and stability is a crushing experience that leaves the person speechless and utterly helpless. Exile and return in *The Inheritance* is a dichotomy that leads to the same result, the same fate, and the same rough realization that what once was will never be again. Khalifeh's *The Inheritance* illuminates Palestinians' unattainable dream of returning to their beloved homeland.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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