

INHERITED SILENCE AND DIASPORIC IDENTITY FORMATION IN HALA ALYAN'S *SALT HOUSES*

Sara Magdi Mamdouh Salama, Lili Awaludin, Yoga Sudarisman

UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Bandung, Indonesia

E-mail: saramagdisalama@gmail.com

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Abstract

In studies of diasporic literature, *Salt Houses* by Hala Alyan has frequently been examined through the lenses of trauma, displacement, and memory. However, less attention has been given to how silence operated as a mechanism through which these experiences were transmitted across generations. This study examined how inherited silence functioned not merely as the absence of speech, but as a force shaping memory, emotion, and diasporic identity. Tracing a Palestinian family across generations, the novel presented quietness and narrative gaps as embedded in both narrative form and everyday interaction. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, this study employed qualitative close reading of narrative gaps and silences within the text. The findings showed that the selective withholding of family history, emotional restraint, and epistemic gaps shaped the transmission of memory and the negotiation of diasporic identity across generations. More broadly, this study positioned silence as a communicative mode of transmission that extended existing discussions of postmemory and trauma beyond explicit narration and representation. By foregrounding silence as an active structure rather than a simple absence, this study contributed to broader discussions of intergenerational memory, diasporic belonging, and cultural identity formation. The study was limited to one literary text, which may have restricted broader generalizability.

Keywords: *diasporic identity; inherited silence; intergenerational trauma; Palestinian diaspora; postmemory.*

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, Middle Eastern diasporic literature has become increasingly prominent in contemporary literary and cultural studies (Alkayid et al., 2023) for its exploration of hybridity, border crossing, and cultural encounters (Baghdadi, 2024) while also offering critical insights into displacement, migration, and how individuals reconstruct a sense of belonging across different geographical and cultural contexts. Within this context, Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses* (2017) has been recognized due to its multigenerational representation of Palestinian diasporic experience. Earlier Palestinian diaspora novels, such as *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) by Susan Abulhawa or *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) by Susan Abulhawa, follow a single narrator or a single migration experience. In contrast,

Salt Houses traces four generations of a Palestinian family across different geographical locations, presenting shifting experiences of memory, identity, and belonging. The novel received the Dayton Literary Peace Prize for Fiction in 2018.

Existing studies on *Salt Houses* primarily focus on themes of trauma, displacement, and fragmented identity. Some scholars focus on how traumatic experiences and memories are transmitted across generations, emphasizing remembrance as a form of resistance to historical erasure (Salam, 2022; Salam & Mahfouz, 2020). Others highlight how repeated displacement produces identity instability and ongoing cultural negotiation within diasporic life (Rubab et al., 2019). Additional studies draw attention to the role of material objects as “memory archives” and to Alyan’s use of multiple narrative voices in representing diasporic experience (Aladylah, 2019; Noreen & Ahmad, 2024). While these studies collectively demonstrate the importance of memory and displacement in the novel, they largely focus on what is explicitly remembered, narrated, or materially preserved. In contrast, this study shifts attention to what remains unspoken, examining inherited silence as an intergenerational mechanism through which memory, emotion, and diasporic identity are also transmitted.

Foregrounding silence as an overlooked dimension of diasporic experience, this study examines inherited silence as an intergenerational mechanism shaping diasporic identity in *Salt Houses*. Rather than treating silence merely as a consequence of trauma, the study considers how unarticulated family histories and emotional experiences influence the transmission of memory and belonging across generations. By shifting attention from explicit remembrance to forms of restricted articulation, this study introduces a new perspective on intergenerational transmission within Palestinian diasporic literature.

This discussion is particularly relevant in contemporary contexts marked by forced migration, postcolonial displacement, and ongoing debates surrounding silenced histories and contemporary diaspora politics. As communities across the world continue to negotiate the long-term effects of displacement and intergenerational trauma, understanding how memory and identity are transmitted not only through explicit remembrance but also through silence becomes increasingly important. Examining inherited silence therefore contributes to broader discussions of how diasporic communities preserve, negotiate, and transform collective identity across generations.

Theoretically, this study draws on Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory and Stuart Hall’s theory of cultural identity and diaspora. The study employs qualitative close reading of narrative gaps, silences, and emotional atmospheres within the novel. By examining how meaning is communicated through absence and restricted articulation, this research extends discussions of intergenerational transmission beyond explicit storytelling. It also contributes to literary and cultural studies by demonstrating how silence functions as a meaningful narrative strategy in diasporic literature.

Therefore, this study addresses the following research question: How does inherited silence function as an intergenerational mechanism shaping diasporic identity in Hala Alyan’s *Salt Houses*? More specifically, it examines how silence mediates memory transmission, emotional inheritance, and epistemic uncertainty across generations.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on *Salt Houses* by Hala Alyan has primarily examined themes of trauma, displacement, and diasporic identity. Salam & Mahfouz (2020) argue that the novel portrays

transgenerational trauma as a force shaping identity across generations, while Rubab et al. (2019) emphasize identity fragmentation caused by repeated displacement and shifting cultural affiliations. Although both studies focus on diasporic instability, Salam and Mahfouz foreground inherited trauma, whereas Rubab et al. concentrate on the negotiation of multiple identities. Together, these studies position memory as a central mechanism sustaining diasporic identity.

Other scholars have explored how memory is mediated through narrative structure, collective remembrance, and material traces. Salam (2022) interprets acts of remembering as forms of resistance against historical erasure within Palestinian diasporic literature. Similarly, Noreen & Ahmad (2024) focus on “memory archives,” such as letters and heirlooms, as tangible carriers of intergenerational memory. In contrast, Aladylah (2019) focuses on the novel’s polyphonic narrative structure and argues that multiple narrative voices produce layered representations of displacement and belonging. Collectively, these studies show that memory is mediated through narrative form, material objects, and collective remembrance. However, despite these contributions, important dimensions of transmission remain insufficiently examined.

This study addresses that gap by positioning inherited silence as a central mechanism of cross-generational transmission. Although previous scholarship has largely concentrated on trauma, memory, and identity formation, no existing study has systematically examined silence as a structured mechanism of transmission in *Salt Houses*. As O’Neill et al. (2018) suggest, intergenerational trauma is often accompanied by silence and emotional restraint that shape familial relationships and historical understanding. However, the specific role of silence as a narrative and affective mechanism remains underexplored in studies of *Salt Houses*.

Beyond trauma and memory studies, silence scholarship increasingly conceptualizes silence not merely as the absence of speech, but as a meaningful social and communicative practice (Murray & Durrheim, 2019). Within intergenerational memory studies, Leksana (2023) argues that silence may function not as forgetting or repression, but as a strategy for coping with trauma and negotiating relationships with the past. Likewise, postmemory scholarship suggests that memories may continue to circulate across generations even in the absence of direct articulation. Together, these perspectives position silence as a medium through which meanings and historical knowledge are transmitted.

Theoretically, this research draws on Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory and Stuart Hall’s theory of cultural identity. Hirsch (2008; 2012) conceptualizes postmemory as the transmission of traumatic experiences through mediated forms such as stories, images, and affective atmospheres. Meanwhile, Hall (2023) defines cultural identity as a continuous process shaped through history, representation, and positionality rather than fixed origins. While Hirsch emphasizes the mediated inheritance of trauma, Hall conceptualizes identity as an ongoing process of positionality and becoming. Read together, these frameworks enable the study to examine how inherited silence shapes both memory transmission and diasporic identity formation. These frameworks further provide a basis for understanding how epistemic gaps and forms of not-knowing emerge through restricted access to family histories and collective memory.

Unlike previous studies that prioritize explicit remembrance or material archives, this research examines how absence and restricted articulation shape diasporic identity and emotional inheritance. By integrating postmemory and cultural identity theory, this study extends existing scholarship on *Salt Houses* by demonstrating that diasporic belonging is shaped not only through what is remembered, but also through forms of silence that regulate access to memory and history.

3. Research Method

This study employs qualitative literary analysis through literary criticism and close textual analysis. Qualitative research is applied to interpret meanings and cultural significance within literary texts, as Creswell & Poth (2018) note. The study focuses on how inherited silence operates as a mechanism of intergenerational transmission in *Salt Houses* by Hala Alyan.

The data sources in this research are divided into primary and secondary data. The primary source is *Salt Houses* (2017), from which the data are drawn in the form of narrative elements, dialogues, and textual passages that reflect inherited silence. These include forms of withheld family history, emotional restraint, unarticulated trauma, and narrative gaps. The secondary data consist of scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles that provide theoretical and analytical support related to postmemory, trauma transmission, and cultural identity.

The data collection process was conducted through close textual reading of the novel. Ohrvik (2024) emphasizes that close reading requires attentiveness to textual detail and meaning, supporting this study's methodological approach. Close reading is particularly appropriate for this study because inherited silence often operates indirectly through omissions, fragmented narration, emotional restraint, and affective atmospheres rather than through explicit statements. Since silence emerges through what remains unarticulated, close reading enables careful attention to subtle textual patterns and narrative absences that might otherwise remain overlooked. Through repeated and focused reading, passages indicating inherited silence were identified and documented. The collected data were classified into three categories: (1) withheld family history, (2) emotional restraint, and (3) epistemic gaps or not-knowing. Irrelevant data were excluded to maintain focus on inherited silence as the central analytical concern.

After the data were collected, they were analyzed descriptively through close textual analysis. Passages were selected based on their relevance to inherited silence, particularly moments in which family history is withheld, emotional expression is restrained, traumatic experiences are indirectly represented, or characters encounter gaps in knowledge about the past. The analysis focused on recurring textual patterns of omission, emotional restraint, narrative interruption, and epistemic uncertainty, which were examined through narrative elements such as dialogue, focalization, narrative gaps, and emotional atmospheres.

To conduct systematic interpretation, these textual features were systematically interpreted through Hirsch's concept of postmemory and Hall's theory of cultural identity to identify how silence structures familial transmission and diasporic identity formation. Hirsch's framework was used to examine how trauma and displacement are transmitted

indirectly through affective atmospheres, fragmented narratives, and incomplete histories, while Hall's theory was employed to analyze how such silences shape diasporic belonging and historical positioning.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of inherited silence in *Salt Houses* identifies three interconnected patterns that shape memory transmission and diasporic identity across generations. First, silence appears through the avoidance and partial withholding of family history, particularly in relation to displacement and loss. Second, silence operates affectively through emotional restraint and habitual quietness, regulating how emotions are expressed within the family. Third, inherited silence produces epistemic gaps or forms of not-knowing that influence how later generations understand and articulate their identities.

In this study, fragmentation refers to incomplete or discontinuous access to family history, while not-knowing refers to epistemic uncertainty produced by restricted transmission. Narrative compression refers to the reduction of complex historical experiences into simplified or abbreviated expressions, whereas suppression refers to moments in which articulation becomes possible but is ultimately withheld. Together, these patterns suggest that silence may function as an intergenerational mechanism shaping memory, emotional inheritance, and diasporic belonging.

4.1 Inherited Silence as Avoidance and Concealment

This section addresses the first research question concerning how inherited silence operates through the withholding of family history in *Salt Houses*. The findings demonstrate that silence frequently appears through partial articulation and selective avoidance, particularly in relation to trauma, displacement, and historical loss.

This pattern is evident in the statement: "*The adults rarely speak of these things, giving vague responses to questions. It is clear they find this talk painful, and Riham isn't the type of girl to ask for more*" (Alyan, 2017, p. 98). In this scene, while helping her grandmother in Amman, Riham recalls hearing about a garden in Palestine that was destroyed by fire during the war and links this memory to her father's prolonged absence. However, the relationship between these events remains unclear to her, as the adults never fully explain their significance.

Silence is constructed not only through what is withheld but through how it is expressed. The phrase "these things" exemplifies semantic vagueness, avoiding direct reference to traumatic events. Such indirection is a recognized feature of trauma discourse, where unspeakable experiences are often expressed through avoidance, abstraction, and referential gaps (Bifulco, 2021). Similarly, the use of expressions such as "rarely speak" and "vague responses" indicates that communication is not absent but carefully limited. This produces a fragmented narrative structure, as elements such as the garden, the war, and the father's absence remain only loosely connected. Trauma memories are often fragmented and lack coherent temporal structure (Bedard-Gilligan et al., 2017) and literary narratives frequently mirror this through disjointed storytelling (Batool & Khan, 2023).

In addition, the use of child focalization further restricts the narrative to the character's limited perception, producing partial knowledge and interpretive gaps. As Genette (1980) argues, internal focalization restricts narration to what a character knows or

perceives, inherently limiting access to complete information. This restricted perspective often results in uncertainty and fragmented representation, particularly in trauma narratives (Hayati, 2025; Myketiak et al., 2017). Such perspectives are particularly significant in contexts of displacement, where childhood perspectives are shaped by evolving and contextually mediated processes of remembering, in which traumatic experiences are continually reinterpreted rather than directly recalled (Nasser, 2025). Silence, therefore, is not only thematic but embedded in the narrative form itself.

This dynamic reflects postmemory, in which the past is inherited through fragments and absences rather than coherent narration (Hirsch, 2012). In this context, silence does not prevent transmission but shapes how it occurs, influencing the ways in which memory circulates within the family. This aligns with Caruth's view that trauma resists full articulation and often appears in indirect and fragmented forms (Caruth, 1991). At the same time, the narrative suggests that fragmentation is not only psychological but socially embedded, shaping patterns of communication across generations.

A similar pattern can be observed in the way historical events are simplified and only partially communicated to younger characters. This is evident in the following exchange: *"The adults won't elaborate"* (Alyan, 2017, p. 200) and *"There's a war. People are fighting, bad things are happening"* (Alyan, 2017, p. 200). This moment occurs when Linah attempts to understand the situation of the war based on what she hears from her parents. Although she is exposed to references to Palestine, Israel, along with references to war, land, and people dying, these ideas are presented to her in generalized and incomplete forms.

The phrase "bad things are happening" is particularly significant because it compresses political violence into abstract vocabulary stripped of historical specificity. Instead of explaining displacement, occupation, or death in concrete terms, the adults replace detail with simplification. This simplification reduces political violence to emotional awareness without historical clarity, allowing Linah to sense that something is wrong without fully understanding it.

The declarative sentence "the adults won't elaborate," further reinforces deliberate narrative restriction. Communication is not interrupted accidentally; it is consciously controlled. Rather than functioning merely as an absence of speech, silence may operate as a meaningful social and communicative practice that structures what can and cannot be said within particular relationships (Murray & Durrheim, 2019). This creates what Philips (1973) describes as narrative compression, where complex events are condensed into abbreviated and incomplete forms. In the novel, compression becomes part of intergenerational communication itself. Historical trauma is not erased entirely but transmitted in reduced and fragmented ways.

This moment reflects indirect intergenerational inheritance, as Linah engages with a past she did not directly experience but inherits indirectly through family memory (Hirsch, 2008). The adults' refusal to elaborate does not prevent transmission; rather, it shapes its form. Instead of receiving a coherent historical account, Linah inherits a fragmented understanding of the past, formed through imaginative investment and projection rather than direct recollection.

The statement "the adults won't elaborate" thus reflects not merely a lack of information but a mode of transmission in itself. In this sense, silence may function as a vehicle of transmission, producing what Eva Hoffman describes as a deeply internalized but "strangely unknown" past that continues to shape the second generation's perception

(Hoffman, 2017). Linah's fragmented understanding is therefore not a failure of communication but a defining feature of indirect memory transmission.

The consequences of this pattern become more visible when Linah is required to articulate her identity. When confronted by a peer who questions her identity and associates Palestinians with violence. Caught off guard and placed under social pressure, she remains silent, not only because of the accusation itself but also because of her limited understanding of her own background: *"...no one ever really talked about being Palestinian in her house... But her voice felt ghosted and so she said nothing at all"* (Alyan, 2017, p. 201–202). Her silence reflects not only hesitation but the absence of accessible narratives through which identity can be expressed.

This moment is shaped through both linguistic and structural features. The phrase "no one ever really talked" indicates habitual avoidance, while the metaphor "her voice felt ghosted" suggests symbolic suppression and difficulty articulating identity. The shift from "wanting to say something" to "so she said nothing at all" emphasizes the breakdown between thought and expression. Unlike earlier moments of narrative compression, this scene reflects narrative suppression, where articulation becomes possible but is ultimately withheld.

This scene demonstrates how inherited silence limits not only knowledge but also the ability to articulate identity. Without access to coherent narratives, Linah cannot position herself within a broader historical framework. As Hall (2023) argues, identity is continuously produced within representation and remains always in process, shaped through discursive positioning rather than fixed essence. In this case, limited access to historical knowledge restricts Linah's ability to construct a coherent account of herself. Her silence thus reflects a lack of discursive resources necessary for self-positioning, leaving her identity fragmented and difficult to articulate.

The long-term consequences of this restricted transmission become more visible in Manar's reflection: *"I thought I had more time... to ask her things"* (Alyan, 2017, p. 237). This moment occurs as Alia's health declines, marking a turning point in intergenerational transmission. As a central bearer of familial memory, Alia represents a key link between past and present. Throughout her life, her granddaughter Manar had opportunities to ask questions about the family's past, particularly regarding displacement, homeland, and earlier generations but these moments were often delayed or avoided. The family environment, shaped by emotional restraint and selective storytelling, did not encourage direct questioning, leading her to assume that there would always be more time to learn.

This scene is shaped through interruption and ellipsis, most clearly in the broken utterance "I thought I had more time—." The dash signals a disruption in speech, reflecting both emotional hesitation and the belated realization of loss. This interruption marks a sense of incompleteness. It reflects the unfinished process of cross-generational transmission. The phrase "to ask her things" remains deliberately vague, reinforcing the idea that what is lost is not only specific information, but an entire category of unarticulated knowledge. The narrative thus foregrounds absence not only at the level of content but also through form, where what cannot be fully spoken corresponds to what can no longer be recovered.

This moment highlights the fragility of inherited mediation. Because memory depends on familial mediation, the loss of the memory-holder disrupts continuity. In this case, the continuity of memory inheritance is disrupted before it can be fully realized. The

past is not only inherited in fragments, but also partially lost due to the delayed engagement with it. What Manar confronts, therefore, is not simply the incompleteness of postmemory, but its fragility, its dependence on the continued presence of those who carry and transmit memory. The absence of direct narration, combined with the eventual loss of the memory-holder, results in what can be understood as a breakdown of postmemorial continuity. Martínez-Alfaro (2016) discussion of intergenerational silence is useful here because she argues that silence often becomes internalized by younger generations, producing what she terms a "double wall" between memory-holders and descendants. In *Salt Houses*, younger characters inherit not only fragmented memory but also hesitation regarding whether painful histories should be discussed at all.

While this first category demonstrates how silence restricts access to historical narration, the following section examines how silence becomes internalized affectively through emotional restraint and habitual quietness.

4.2 Inherited Silence as Emotional Restraint

The second finding addresses how inherited silence functions affectively within family relationships. Unlike the previous section, which focused primarily on restricted historical narration, this category examines how silence regulates emotional expression and becomes normalized as interpersonal behavior. This pattern appears in the scene: "...*All three stand in silence, the unsaid a living thing between them*" (Alyan, 2017, p. 22).

In this scene, hesitation and silence emerge during a family interaction between Atef, Mustafa and Salma. Although there is an opportunity for further discussion, Atef and Mustafa remain quiet, and certain thoughts are left unsaid. A few months prior to this interaction, Mustafa and Atef were arrested at a demonstration in Jerusalem because they were motivated by the mosque youths. Since then, Salma has prohibited them from becoming involved with the mosque youths (*shabab*) and from getting into trouble again.

This silence is constructed through metaphor and narrative emphasis. The phrase "the unsaid a living thing between them" personifies silence, transforming it into an active presence that occupies space, carries weight, and mediates relationships between characters. Rather than resolving tension through dialogue, the narrative sustains it through silence. Ephratt (2008) notes that silence may operate communicatively by conveying meaning indirectly through shared emotional awareness. In Alyan's novel, silence frequently performs this relational function.

This representation reflects trauma's indirect and delayed expression (Caruth, 1991). The silence shared between the characters reflects the presence of an experience that remains difficult to articulate, yet continues to shape their interaction. Importantly, this silence is not empty; it signals a mutual awareness of what cannot be fully expressed, indicating that communication operates at an affective level rather than through explicit language.

At the same time, this moment highlights the affective dimension of postmemory, where transmission does not rely solely on narrative content but also occurs through mediated and affective forms of inheritance (Hirsch, 2012). The younger generation, in turn, inherits not only fragments of the past, but also the conditions under which that past is encountered, often through absence, gaps, and displacement. In this way, memory is shaped by what cannot be fully reconstructed or coherently narrated, influencing how individuals relate to the past and to their own emotional experiences.

This pattern becomes more explicit in the statement: *"If it hurts, leave it"* (Alyan, 2017, p. 130). This moment occurs when Alia observes her daughter Souad reacting emotionally while watching a news report. Souad's outburst prompts Salma to remark that she has "her brother's blood," referring to Mustafa, Alia's brother who was killed during the war in Palestine. The comment draws an implicit connection between Souad's temperament and Mustafa's memory, reintroducing a figure whose presence has largely remained unspoken within the family. It is at this point that the narrative reveals that Mustafa's name is avoided for years at a time, following an unspoken agreement between Alia and Atef that painful subjects should not be discussed. The reference to Mustafa thus emerges only indirectly, triggered by resemblance rather than deliberate recollection, highlighting how his memory persists within the family despite the absence of open acknowledgment.

Silence is therefore articulated as a habitual and normative practice. The narrative reinforces this through the prolonged avoidance of Mustafa's name: *"Mustafa, whose name they go entire years at a time without speaking"* (Alyan, 2017, p. 130). This prolonged absence of speech is then codified in the directive, *"If it hurts, leave it,"* which condenses a potentially complex emotional reality into a simple rule. Its generalized structure, lacking a specific subject, gives it a universal quality, transforming a situational response into an internalized norm. This compression reflects a broader pattern of silence in the narrative, where emotional complexity is contained rather than elaborated, reflecting the indirect and mediated nature of transmission (Hirsch, 2012).

Silence becomes a learned response, transmitted across generations as both an emotional strategy and a communicative constraint. In this sense, what is inherited is not only memory, but the instruction to avoid engaging with it directly.

This dynamic becomes more visible in moments where articulation is possible but ultimately withheld. The phrase *"He wants to tell her everything... But there is only silence"* (Alyan, 2017, p. 238) highlights the tension between intention and expression, suggesting that silence here results not from absence, but from suppression at the moment speech becomes possible. This occurs after Manar regrets not asking her grandmother, Alia, about the family's past before her health declines. As the conversation turns to earlier life in Nablus, Atef appears ready to speak, but remains silent. Manar does not interrupt this silence, allowing the moment to pass. The scene thus shows that memory is emotionally present, yet remains unarticulated within the family.

This tension is created through the contrast between the expectation of speech and its eventual absence. The phrase *"He wants to tell her everything"* creates an anticipation of disclosure, suggesting that Atef's memories and emotions are ready to be expressed. This expectation is reinforced through the narration of his internal state—his tears, his awareness of his grandchildren, and his recognition of the significance of the moment, which positions him on the verge of speaking. However, when Manar addresses him and he responds, *"What?"*, that possibility of expression is immediately interrupted, as *"there is only silence."* This contrast between emotional readiness and verbal absence highlights a disconnect between internal experience and external expression. Rather than signaling incompleteness, the scene presents silence as withheld articulation: the meaning is present and emotionally formed, but remains unspoken, showing silence as an active constraint rather than a passive absence.

This aligns with the view that traumatic experience is not fully accessible at the moment it occurs and often emerges belatedly and indirectly (Caruth, 1991). Atef's recollection of his past with Alia is emotionally vivid and internally accessible, yet it cannot be translated into speech. The silence that follows is therefore not a sign of forgetting, but of the difficulty of articulating an experience that remains affectively present. These limits of articulation are shaped not only by individual experience but also by broader social and intergenerational conditions (Thambinathan et al., 2023).

This scene reveals a limit of transmission: memory persists, but transmission fails at the moment of articulation (Hirsch, 2012). Manar is positioned as a potential recipient and Atef as its bearer, yet the transfer does not occur. Silence thus marks a disruption in transmission, where memory remains present but unshared, raising the question not only of what is remembered, but whether it can be shared at all.

Importantly, Manar does not challenge Atef's silence. Instead, she accepts it and allows the conversation to end. This response suggests that emotional restraint has become internalized across generations. Silence is therefore sustained relationally: older generations withhold articulation, while younger generations learn not to disrupt that withholding.

These examples demonstrate that inherited silence gradually evolves from restricted narration into habitual emotional practice. What begins as avoidance of traumatic history becomes embedded within everyday interaction and emotional behavior. The result is a family environment in which emotional intensity remains present yet difficult to articulate openly.

These affective forms of silence ultimately contribute to epistemic uncertainty, where later generations inherit emotional traces of trauma without access to coherent explanatory narratives. This transition leads to the third category of analysis: inherited silence as not-knowing.

4.3 Inherited Silence as Not-Knowing

The final finding addresses how inherited silence produces epistemic gaps or forms of not-knowing that shape diasporic belonging formation. While the previous sections focused on restricted narration and emotional restraint, this category examines how accumulated silences affect later generations' ability to articulate historical belonging and cultural identity. This dynamic becomes evident when Manar is detained at the Tel Aviv airport while attempting to visit Palestine and is questioned about her family history, particularly her grandfather's displacement from Nablus. Unable to provide clear answers, she repeatedly responds, "*I don't know, 'Manar said to the officer over and over*" (Alyan, 2017, p. 247).

The repetition of "I don't know" reflects more than personal uncertainty. It reveals the consequences of interrupted familial transmission. Manar has inherited emotional connections to Palestine, yet she lacks the historical narratives necessary to explain that connection in institutional or discursive terms. The interrogation therefore exposes a conflict between lived diasporic experience and external expectations that identity must be verifiable through coherent historical knowledge.

This illustrates Hall's notion of identity as discursively constructed and relational (Hall, 2023). Manar's inability to provide a coherent narrative does not indicate the absence of identity, but rather the difficulty of aligning her lived experience with the forms through which identity is recognized and validated.

This condition corresponds to what Harris (2020) describes as a “knowing–not knowing” relationship to traumatic history, where descendants remain emotionally aware of the past while lacking direct narrative access to it. Similarly, Leksana (2023) argues that silence does not necessarily indicate forgetting or repression, but may function as a way of navigating relationships with traumatic histories. Read together, these perspectives suggest that silence may sustain affective attachment to the past while simultaneously limiting access to narrative knowledge. The novel demonstrates that inherited silence shapes not only what later generations know but also the terms through which identity must be explained and recognized.

This pattern suggests that inherited silence does not simply limit what is known about the past, but shapes the very terms through which identity must be explained and recognized. Furthermore, this moment shows how inherited silence creates a gap between internal experience and the need to provide clear, communicable knowledge. In the interrogation setting, not-knowing becomes a point of pressure, as what remains unspoken within the family is exposed when clarity is externally required. Manar’s repeated “I don’t know” also suggests that silence has been internalized as a mode of response, where restraint takes precedence over assertion.

This condition is rooted in earlier patterns of silence. When asked about her grandfather, Manar recalls not stories, but his habitual quietness: “...entire evenings could go by without him speaking” (Alyan, 2017, p. 247).

Growing up, Atef rarely spoke about his life, and extended periods of time would pass without conversation or storytelling. The phrase “entire evenings” emphasizes duration and repetition, indicating that silence is not occasional but routine. Rather than inheriting stories, Manar inherits absence itself. Frosh (2019) argues that traumatic inheritance frequently occurs through indirect familial atmospheres and behavioral patterns alongside explicit narration. In Alyan’s novel, silence becomes one of those inherited atmospheres. This interpretation also resonates with Leksana’s (2023) discussion of postmemory, which suggests that silence does not necessarily signify forgetting or repression, but may shape how later generations relate to traumatic histories even when stories remain unspoken.

The effects of not-knowing become more explicit when Manar struggles to identify her grandparents’ origins: “Was it Nablus?... Had there been somewhere before that?” (Alyan, 2017, p. 247). Even foundational information about her grandparents remains unclear, and the addition of a question mark signals doubt about the accuracy of what she knows. This reflects how inherited silence disrupts the transmission of foundational knowledge, leaving individuals without a clear sense of origin.

This fractured representation significantly shapes identity formation in diaspora. Throughout the novel, identity emerges not as stable inheritance but as ongoing negotiation shaped by displacement, partial memory, and interrupted transmission. Hall’s theory of cultural identity is especially relevant here because identity is constructed through processes of positioning rather than fixed origins. However, *Salt Houses* demonstrates that these processes become more difficult when access to historical narratives is fragmented or incomplete.

This internal condition of not-knowing is further shaped by external perception, during her visit to the West Bank, Manar senses that others see her as “not like us.” (Alyan, 2017, p. 245). As she writes an email to her family and friends reflecting on her visit. In the

message, she describes how the Palestinians she has met have been consistently kind toward her, but she senses an underlying tone of pity in their behavior.

Importantly, no one explicitly states that she is “not like us.” Instead, this is Manar’s interpretation of how she is being perceived. Her assumption emerges from subtle social cues, kindness combined with distance, which she reads as an indication of difference. This again reflects identity as a process of positioning rather than fixed belonging (Hall, 2023). Manar’s sense of difference thus arises not only from what she knows, but from how she is read and situated by others in specific cultural contexts.

This sense of difference is further reinforced in the description of her background as “A mutt” (Alyan, 2017, p. 240). This moment reflects Manar’s awareness of how her identity is perceived across different contexts, particularly through markers such as accent. Her recognition as Lebanese rather than Palestinian highlights how identity is read and categorized externally, often through limited or visible signs. The reference to her background “Lebanese father, Palestinian mother, Paris, America” (Alyan, 2017, p. 240) emphasizes the multiplicity of her diasporic experience.

The label “mutt,” used casually by her close friend Seham, points to this multiplicity rather than a single, stable origin. While the term may appear informal or even affectionate, it also underscores how her identity is composed of overlapping affiliations that do not easily resolve into a unified category.

This reinforces the idea that cultural identity is not fixed, but continuously produced through displacement and difference (Hall, 2023). Manar’s identity is not located in a singular origin, but produced through multiple trajectories of displacement and cultural interaction. The tension in this moment arises not simply from hybridity itself, but from the difficulty of positioning that hybridity within dominant frameworks of representation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that inherited silence significantly influences diasporic identity formation in *Salt Houses*. Silence restricts access to historical narration, regulates emotional expression, and produces epistemic uncertainty regarding origin and belonging. As a result, identity becomes shaped not only by displacement itself but also by restricted access to familial memory and intergenerational knowledge.

More broadly, the novel suggests that silence in Middle Eastern diasporic literature should not be understood solely as absence or repression. Instead, silence may function as a narrative and affective structure through which memory, trauma, and belonging are mediated across generations. In contexts shaped by war, migration, and political rupture, disrupted continuity becomes part of how diasporic subjects encounter history and construct identity.

However, this analysis is limited to a single literary text and therefore may not fully represent the broader complexity of diasporic literature. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate how inherited silence may function as an important mechanism shaping memory transmission and identity formation within contemporary Middle Eastern diasporic narratives.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that silence in *Salt Houses* functions as a structuring force that shapes memory, emotion, and diasporic identity across generations. The findings show that inherited silence operates through three interconnected patterns: avoidance and concealment of family history, emotional restraint, and epistemic gaps or forms of not-

knowing. Rather than interrupting transmission, silence mediates how memory, knowledge, and emotion circulate within the family, shaping the conditions through which the past becomes accessible and meaningful.

This study contributes to postmemory and trauma studies by identifying silence as a communicative mode of transmission, expanding existing frameworks beyond explicit narration and imagery. By shifting focus from memory content to transmission conditions, this study offers a novel lens for analyzing diasporic identity. The findings further suggest that silence should not merely be understood as absence within diasporic narratives, but as an active structure through which memory, identity, and historical consciousness are mediated across generations.

This insight may inform broader analyses of diasporic literature and cultural memory, encouraging scholars to consider silence as an active dimension of transmission. However, this analysis is limited to a single literary text and may not fully represent the broader complexity of diasporic literature. Future research could examine silence in other diasporic texts, particularly Lebanese, Syrian, or Iraqi narratives, to test the applicability of this framework across different cultural and historical contexts.

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