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Abstract

This paper will explore how olives are used to represent the trope of the return home. Anthony Shadid's 'House of Stone' (2012) and Suad Amiry's 'My Damascus' (2016) detail the olive as a symbolic motif to express home, loss and exile. Shadid and Amiry both call attention to the prominence of olives and their many uses in Arab culinary culture. Where the physical house no longer exists or has been left desolate, these culinary tropes represent reminders or remnants of the lost home. Through a focus on the ancestral home, I trace the socio-political changes in the region which lead to the family's displacement and exile from the homeland. I also demonstrate different modes of movement which are shaped from not only the geo-political landscape but also traditional cultural mandates whereby food traditions are preserved and sustained by future generations living in the diaspora. In both memoirs, there is a meticulous documentation of genealogy which also produces, in fascinating ways, a cultural history of the memoirist's home. This home is intergenerational, and is itself formed from Arab culture and food. The writing of traditional Arab food, in particular olives, preserves the writers' Arab ancestry and locates this heritage in the memoir. I examine the representation of olives through movement and relocation. I explore both the centrifugal movement of the writers' families away from the homeland, and the writers' centripetal movement back towards it. Therefore, the olives becomes the focal construct to trace these familial crossings across the adopted country and the ancestral place origin. The comparative study of olives in these texts unearths a larger geopolitical framework of migration and mobility.

Keywords: Middle East, diaspora, migration, memoir, life writing.

ملخص

يستكشف هذا المقال كيفية استخدام الزيتون لتمثيل مجاز العودة إلى الوطن. يفصل كل من "بيت الحجر" لأنطوني شديد (2012) و"دمشقي" لسعاد العامري (2016) الزيتون كعنصر رمزي للتعبير عن الوطن والخسارة والمنفى. يلفت كل من شديد وأميري الانتباه إلى أهمية الزيتون واستخداماته المتعددة في ثقافة الطهي العربية. عندما لا يكون المنزل الفعلي موجوداً أو يُترك مهجوراً، فإن استعارات الطهي هذه تمثل تذكيرات أو بقايا للمنزل المفقود. ومن خلال التركيز على موطن الأجداد، أتتبع التغيرات الاجتماعية والسياسية في المنطقة والتي أدت إلى نزوح الأسرة ونفيها من الوطن. أقوم أيضاً بإظهار أنماط مختلفة من الحركة التي تتشكل ليس فقط من المشهد الجيوسياسي ولكن أيضاً من الولايات الثقافية التقليدية التي يتم من خلالها الحفاظ على التقاليد الغذائية واستدامتها للأجيال القادمة التي تعيش في الشتات. يوجد في كلتا المذكرات توثيق دقيق للأنساب ينتج أيضاً، بطرق رائعة، تاريخاً ثقافياً للمنزل كاتبات المذكرات. هذا المنزل يتوارثه الأجيال، ويتشكل في حد ذاته من الثقافة والطعام العربي. إن كتابة الطعام العربي التقليدي، وخاصة الزيتون، تحافظ على الأصول العربية للكتاب وتضع هذا التراث في المذكرات. وكذلك أقوم بدراسة تمثيل الزيتون من خلال الحركة والانتقال واستكشف كلا من الحركة النابذة لعائلات الكتاب بعيداً عن الوطن، وحركة الجذب المركزي للكتاب نحو الوطن. لذلك، يصبح الزيتون هو البناء المحوري لتتبع هذه المعابر العائلية عبر البلد المبتني وأصل مكان الأجداد. تكشف الدراسة المقارنة للزيتون في هذه النصوص عن إطار جيوسياسي أكبر للهجرة والتنقل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشرق الأوسط، الشتات، الهجرة، المذكرات، الكتابة عن الحياة.

'the olive is malak al-sufra, after all, the king of the table' (Shadid, 2012, p. 78). In this paper, I examine how olives, a significant feature in traditional Arab cuisine, are used as a symbolic motif to express sentiments of home. I explore the representation of olive specifically through movement and relocation. In order to do this, I focus on two recent memoirs: Anthony Shadid's House of Stone: A Memoir of Home, Family and a Lost Middle East (2012) and Suad Amiry's My Damascus (2016). Both memoirs detail the experience of returning to the family home in light of a family context of dispossession and exile. Shadid and Amiry combine emotive storytelling of their family history against the socio-political changes in Lebanon and Syria during the twentieth century. Through a locus on the olive, I trace centripetal and centrifugal movements to and from the ancestral homelands. The olive is a focal construct used to trace family crossings; in Shadid's case from the United States to Lebanon and for Amiry, from regions within the Arab world: Palestine and Syria. I argue that it is from tracing these various crossings that the concept of the 'intergenerational' home is figured from Arab food – olives –, and culture. What I mean by intergenerational is the ways in which memories, narratives and migrations are conceived as circular and interconnected across multiple generations in these texts. Both memoirs reveal a meticulous documentation of genealogy where olives feature prominently in telling family history.

Introduction

Olives are central to Arab culture. They are eaten pickled or raw to accompany many Arab dishes, and its oil is used apart from cooking to be made into soaps and its leaves are used for its medicinal qualities. The olive trees' wood is also used for ornamental purposes. Olive trees are one of the oldest trees in the world; 'traces of olive trees in Palestine date back to 8,000 BC' (Abufarha, 2008, p. 353). They grow in the Mediterranean due to its temperate climate and are found across the Middle East, Southern Europe and North Africa. In particular, olives play an important role in Palestine as they provide the backbone of the nation's agricultural economy. Reger notes that 'In the hills of the Galilee and the West Bank, most Palestinians were small farmers for whom the olive tree and its products constituted a central means of subsistence and revenue generation in times of surplus' (2017, p. 31). A common and simple breakfast found across Arab homes is dipping bread into zaatar and olive oil. Olives not only yield a triad of bitter, salty and tangy flavours, but are rich in nutritional value. Therefore, they are a precious daily commodity in these

households (Aburfarha, 2008). Moreover, the majority of Arab recipes are made using olive oil.

On the other hand, olives are longstanding symbols of peace, as seen through the proverb 'to extend an olive branch'. The symbolic connotation of the olive ranges from different ethno-religious traditions such as from Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, Judeo-Christianity and Islam as the fruit is perceived as divine and sacred. However, the opposite is true of the place and presence of olive trees in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict as thousands of trees are uprooted from Palestinian villages and replanted into Israeli settlements since and throughout the formation of the Israeli occupation (Sharkawi, 2019, p. 76). Thus, in this contemporary setting the olive has become a loaded political marker. Renowned poet Mahmoud Darwish titled his first collection of poetry 'Leaves of the Olive Tree' (1964) to express Palestinian resistance to Israeli rule. He famously wrote, 'If the olive trees knew the hands that planted them, their oil would become tears'. While it is commonly established that olives symbolise peace, steadfastness, nationhood and identity in the Arab community, I am analysing the other socio-cultural dimensions of this fruit. Some scholars assert that olive trees are symbols of nationhood through rootedness to the land (Abufarha, 2008, p. 366), but I am interested in how the olive tells a story of crossings and travels through different locations both physical and imaginary within the archive of family and national memory. Bujupaj describes 'Trees do not have political identities, generally speaking. However, one can construe them in ways that are imbued with cultural politics' (2015, p. 17). I uncover how this symbolic fruit which traverses various locations alongside families who inhabit multiple homes, yet it still embodies these families' connection to the homeland. Therefore, the olive details the political identities of the various geographic backgrounds where it has been transported to and from.

The Roots and Routes of Olives

In order to study the representation of olives in the texts, I focus on the framework of 'roots and routes', terms originally associated with the work of Paul Gilroy (1993), but now familiar within diaspora studies. I turn to the field of Lebanese diaspora to situate my reading of 'roots and routes' within an Arab literary discourse. Jumana Bayeh, a key critic in this field, argues that three models of home tend to occur in Lebanese diasporic fiction. Firstly, home is understood in terms of both roots and stasis that is, through its relation to

Lebanon. Secondly, since the narrative of home is reflected in routes that the migrant community travels, home is mobile and represented across various geographical borders. Thirdly, home is constituted by a combination of roots and routes (2015, p. 374).¹

House of Stone and *My Damascus* are not works of fiction, yet the way Shadid and Amiry write is certainly emblematic of Bayeh's analysis, particularly through the figuration of the olive as being connected to roots and routes. Amiry's text evokes routes by recording the ways in which her maternal family travel between Damascus and 'Arrabeh transporting olive oil from the family groves. On the other hand, Shadid returns to his ancestral village, Marjayoun, and tends to his great-grandparents' olive trees which remain rooted to the land although his ancestors have migrated. The olive tree, *al-zaytouna*, as a symbol of rootedness has already been established by some scholars. Abufarha states:

The Palestinian tradition of communal olive harvest and the persistence of traditional farming practices to maintain the olive orchard all contributed to the articulation of al-zaytouna, the olive tree, as symbol for the Palestinian nation rooted in the land of Palestine. (2008, pp. 353 – 354)

In *My Damascus*, Amiry highlights the significance of her maternal grandmother's family groves in 'Arrabeh which are maintained by the relatives who remain there. Both memoirs point to a multitude of memories within the ancestral houses which recall various times and places in the history of Shadid's and Amiry's family lives within Lebanon and Syria respectively. Additionally, though roots might intuitively be associated with fixity, this is not always the case. As Paul Tabar and Jennifer Skulte-Ouaiss argue, 'Our "roots" [...] are not seen as something firmly entrenched, grounded and unmovable, but that move with you where you go' (2010, p. xvi).² This understanding of 'roots' that travel with you relates to my study of olives in the authors' family memories as they describe various locations across their family history, and the olives which travel with them and are consumed across these locations.

¹ See also Bayeh, J. (2015). *The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris, in particular her section on 'Home, Mobility, Immobility'.

² See also Ghassan Hage (2010). With the fig, the olive and the pomegranate trees: Thoughts on Australian belonging. In Tabar, P & Skulte-Ouaiss, J. *Politics, culture and the Lebanese diaspora*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

In order to understand the larger contextual backdrop of departure and return, I turn to a brief discussion on diaspora. James Clifford states, ‘Diaspora cultures [...] mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place’ (1994, p. 311). The paradoxes Clifford describes is emblematic for diasporic persons due to them occupying an in-between space when thinking about where home is located. This is true of the memoirs I study as they illustrate families living across multiple geographical locations in the adopted host countries and the ancestral homelands. Shadid and Amiry negotiate the ‘lived tension’ of living *here* but dreaming of *there* through writing of olives and its symbolic connotations by delineating these boundaries between the adopted country and the homeland.

Moreover, Avtar Brah argues that ‘paradoxically, diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots “elsewhere”’ (1997, p. 182). However, the texts I examine portray the reverse of this diasporic journey. In *House of Stone*, I examine Shadid’s personal journey of return, but in *My Damascus*, instead I focus on Amiry’s maternal relatives’ experiences of return. In both texts, the authors and their family members return to their ancestral homelands to put down and re-establish their Arab roots. It is the centripetal movement towards the place of origin that unearths their ancestral identities, and it is the celebration and consumption of olives that make up part of these journeys. The representation of olives in the texts re-establishes their roots to the motherland. This corresponds to Bayeh’s first paradigm of Lebanese diasporic homes, mentioned earlier – the way home is represented through a rooted place. The text chronicles memories that are tied to olives which reflect not only the family, but also memories of the geographic backdrop, Marjayoun and Damascus. As Brah argues, ‘the concept of diaspora delineates a field of identifications where “imagined communities” are forged within and out of a confluence of narratives from annals of collective memory and re-memory’ (1997, p. 196). Both writers use their narratives to establish an ‘imagined community’ through harvesting and dining on olives. Once again, the text focuses on the centripetal direction towards the homeland. Shadid’s harvesting of the olives from his ancestors olive trees and Amiry’s mother transporting olive oil from the family groves in Palestine to Syria unearths a process of preservation of family identity through culinary tropes.

The ways in which olives travel in these texts reflect what Joanne Hollows argues of 'aspects of material culture [that] are themselves mobile' (2008, p. 3). The olives which travel with the families offer a sustained link to the homeland. Hollows understanding of mobile material cultures extends upon James Clifford's concept of 'travelling cultures': 'travelling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-travelling' (1992, p. 108). In the texts I examine, olives fortify a connection to the lost home when the physical site no longer exists or does not remain as it was once. The preparation and consumption of certain kinds of food is associated with recollections which create a feeling of nostalgia. Shadid and Amiry both call attention to the prominence of olives and their many uses in Arab culinary culture. The presence of olives is an important motif in both the ancestral and diasporic homes.

Anthony Shadid *House of Stone* (2012)

Before I examine the uses of olives in both memoirs, I lay out the socio-political changes in the region which lead to the families' exile and displacement. Through this locus, I demonstrate different modes of movement and mandates that affect the families' connection and dis-connection to their homelands. In light of this context, certain food traditions are preserved and sustained in the diaspora. Shadid traces the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century to the decades-long civil war, and finally the withdrawal of the Israeli and Syrian troops from Lebanon's borders. The Levantine world changes from a united territory to a then fractured region. Ken Seigneurie states: 'the cosmopolitan identities of many great Levantine cities—Istanbul, Izmir, Aleppo, Haifa, and Alexandria—were gradually leached through national and sectarian identities' (2011, p. 5). In addition, Lindsey Moore notes that,

The country now known as Lebanon was created and mandated by France, as part of Greater Syria, between 1920 and 1943. The colonial annexation of formerly Ottoman lands in the Levant and wider Mashreq (Arab east), in the aftermath of World War One, led to the creation of several small states defined by a hitherto unfamiliar line of demarcation: the national boundary. (2018, p. 129)

The demarcation of these borders led to a mass emigration of the region's inhabitants as famine and disease spread when the British and French 'enforced a blockade of all Arab ports in the Mediterranean' during the first decades of the

twentieth century (Shadid, 2012, p. xix). Furthermore, the growing ethnic tensions between Muslims and Christians after the fall of the Ottomans and during French rule would be the catalyst for Shadid's great-grandfather Isber, who was Orthodox Christian, to send his children to Brazil and the United States to escape the conflict in the region (Shadid, 2012, p. 132). Lebanon's civil war erupted in 1975 owing to unrest between the various religious sects: the Maronite Christian minority held political power over the majority Muslim population after the French mandate was drawn in the 1920s. This led to new borders being erected throughout the region of Greater Syria. The Christian population were backed by France and other Western allies, whereas the Muslim population were supported by Syria. Consequently, Syria and Israel invaded Lebanon, with Israel withdrawing completely in 2000 and Syria withdrawing only in 2005 shortly before the eruption of the 2006 'July war' between Hezbollah and the IDF (Israeli Defence Force) (Goldschmidt and Davidson, 2013, p. 374).

Shadid envisages the olive tree and its fruit as central to how he imagines home. It is not only the inner domains of his ancestral home which is left in ruins, but also the exterior of the house such as the garden and the trees. All must be restored. Apart from expounding the memorial properties of nature, I also explore the sensory experiences which reinforce the idea of home; I show how Shadid's consumption of traditional Lebanese foods such as olives, makes him feel particularly at home.

Olive trees are abundantly planted throughout the landscape Shadid describes. He is particularly attached to them, writing that 'In a land of graceful beauty, the olive tree is the most elegant. Its height never speaks to its age. It is more modest. Its trunk suggests its years by its features, the same furrows of Jabal al-Sheik [Mount Lebanon]' (2006). He notes that there are many olive trees in Marjayoun and 'two aristocratic olive trees [...] stood at the entrance of Isber's house, their leaves carpeting the ground in a light brown, like a fine silk rug thrown over the dirt' (2012, p. 78). They are symbols of peace and ownership and the leaves which litter the ground are found at most houses.¹

¹ Shadid also evokes this metaphor of the trees as a carpet in his reflection of them onto the landscape: 'Olive trees unfurl like a carpet through the wadis'. (2006, April 16). Lebanon, My Lebanon. *The Washington Post*.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2006/04/16/lebanon-my-lebanon/e9eaff5d-a9d9-4278-9817-a6d1d0b4ea11/>

Positioned at the entrance to the house the pair of trees separate its interior from its exterior. They are ubiquitous emblems of the Levantine home and are of great significance to his memoir. In the epilogue, Shadid focuses on these particular trees to display the connection of family and home, past and present. He writes:

I walked beside Isber's house of stone, passing the two ancient olive trees, still standing from the day my grandmother had said goodbye. I thought of my daughter, soon to arrive, walking up the steps from which her great-grandmother had departed. (2012, p. 307)

These trees play an important role not only during his lifetime but also in death; poignantly, his ashes are buried between them (Bakri, 2012 & L.J Shadid, 2018).¹ They are among the constants in an ever-shifting narrative of spaces and places which Shadid and his extended family who left Marjayoun travel to and from. They exhibit Shadid's hope that he will find peace in his ancestral hometown. Furthermore, they suggest the relationship between different generations of the Samara, his maternal, family. Shadid is the axis between his grandmother's, Raeeffa, departure from the house and his daughter's hoped for return to it. Like the house, the trees have suffered the ravages of the civil war. Shadid reflects ironically on the biblical signification of olive trees when he writes: 'olives were trees of peace, and there was no peace here' (2012, p. 130). Shadid, a diasporic Lebanese American, returns to Marjayoun to escape a sense of unbelonging, but the post war-torn backdrop proves otherwise.

Instead, what the olive trees illustrate is an unearthing of family identity. Olive trees represent a genealogy of continuity as they bridge four generations: Shadid's great-grandparents, his grandmother, himself and his daughter. He writes that when Raeeffa leaves Marjayoun for the United States 'she was leaving home, the olive trees that she had played near, the fig tree that she had eaten from, the stone wall that she had climbed' (2012, p. 152). Though she leaves the family home, the trees remain. Indeed, they even provide a connection right back to Shadid's great grandparents, Isber and Bahija, for the trees were already there when they inhabited *bayt* Samara, the ancestral home. The juxtaposition of Raeeffa's departure on the one hand, and Shadid's return on

¹ Shadid died tragically while on a work assignment shortly before the publication of his memoir.

the other are figuratively linked through his reflections on the olive trees. He describes,

Between the two olive trees, inherited from Isber and remembered by Raeefa, I set up a table. For a top, I used a slab of marble from the counter of Abu Elie's old kitchen that we had dismantled long ago. I bought three plastic white chairs from a shop down the street. On this evening, I sat there and stared into the distance, not wanting to be anywhere else.

The olive trees help to create a tranquil space. They are symbolic continuities to the past of his ancestors, and were 'inherited from Isber and remembered by Raeefa'. These two verbs exhibit both possession and ancestral memory. Shadid remains rooted to the space with the trees flanking him. His presence here counters Raeefa's absence from the trees and her family home and he constructs a kind of return for her.

Shadid quells his feelings of outsiderdom not only by rebuilding the house, but also by harvesting the olives from the trees in his garden: 'there was something admittedly romantic about a harvest that [...] seemed a soothing ritual, full of renewal and healing' (2012, p. 78). As the interior of the house begins to take shape, he turns to the exterior to find tranquillity. The fruit of the trees also embody the genealogy of the family. After successfully harvesting and pickling the olives, Shadid proclaims: "The first batch from *Bayt Samara* in generations" (2012, p. 82). Shadid's harvest recalls how Palestinian farmers maintain a line of continuity with their planting olive trees for future generations:

The present generation feels an obligation of reciprocity toward the past generation, who passed on the olive trees and land to them, and they pay back the future generations by planting new trees in the land they pass on. Hence, the olive tree provides a medium for a transitive reciprocity amongst Palestinians that regenerates peoplehood fused with its land and past and future generations. (Abufarha, 2008, p. 358)

The olive is an intergenerational construct. The fruit ensures the people of the land are able to live of it and pass on this caring and planting of new trees for the future generations. Likewise, Shadid being able to harvest the fruit from his great-grandfather's trees exemplifies the notion of sustainability and longevity

which is preserved through future generations maintaining the trees that have been planted by previous generations.

The work Shadid does to procure the olives allows him to reflect on home through the gustatory:

I promised myself that I would save a jar of olives for my last night, to celebrate with when the house was finally done. Taking it from the cabinet, I put a dozen or so in a white bowl fitting for my ceremony. I tried two or three. They had aged well despite being picked too early by a novice, a newcomer, but they were no longer bitter and the taste of salt had been somehow subdued. As I ate them, I thought of the day when my daughter and I would savour the fruit from the tree, the tree planted the day I began the journey back to Isber's. There was more life to come in this old house. (2012, pp. 298-299)

The olives which were no longer bitter signal the end of Shadid's painstaking journey. The 'subdued' taste suggests diminishment. Hopefully there will be a future where he can make better tasting olives: 'there was more life to come'. This remark signals the beginning of future ventures in pickling olives. In this process of preparing and tasting the fruit, he creates a ceremony, a ritual of sorts as he places a 'dozen or so in a white bowl'. His journey of rebuilding the family home comes full circle from the day he planted this tree to the present where he consumes its fruit. He is tasting home – past, present and future – through something which is prevalent in Lebanese cuisine: 'the olive is *malak al-sufra*, after all, the king of the table' (2012, p. 78). Moreover, the line of continuity is passed on through the taste of the olives, to his daughter, who he hopes will also taste them.¹ However, though he cannot know this at the time of writing, his yearnings will never be realised, due to his death. The notion of 'transitive reciprocity' here highlights the rooted fixity of the trees to the land even as its caretakers change over time.

Suad Amiry's *My Damascus* (2016)

Amiry's navigation of journeys illuminates the relationship between a turbulent family life and a declining empire. The Ottoman region develops from a single territorial area that is then broken up as new states, including Syria and

¹ Although Shadid's son is yet to be born at the time of writing the memoir, this yearning for the future would also have to include his son.

Palestine, are carved out by the French and British colonial powers. The text locates multiple places across Damascus, 'Arrabeh and Jerusalem to demonstrate the plurality of the Baroudi family's lives. They are not only Damascene; they come from and later inhabit surrounding Palestinian locales, making them both Damascene and Palestinian. However, it is important to note that these national distinctions are contemporary; I argue that Amiry not only revives the past in a nostalgic way, but also aims to capture what it means to be both Syrian and Palestinian in a time before these national distinctions were constructed through the representation of olives. Amiry depicts the history of the region before borders divided it. Thus, this reimagining of the past through the construct of the olive shows a collective and unified identity of the Arab world which no longer exists today.

These diasporic crossings which are set exclusively within the Arab world underline a navigation of spaces, boundaries and borders that are unique to this region. Although the text is about Damascus, Palestinian identity and locales feature prominently. I contend that *My Damascus* is a homage not only to the Syrian capital, but also to Palestine. Thousands of Palestinians are living in 'what [they] call "the ongoing *Nakba*", that is, the persistence and escalation of their crisis (Sayigh, 2015, p. 194). Because of the *Nakba*, Arab citizens are subject to territorial incarceration due to blockades and restricted movement control. This reality is the cause of the 'expanding Palestinian *shatat*' [scattering, diaspora] (Sayigh, 2015, p. 194). Amiry's text seeks to connect a fractured Arab world and its disenfranchised citizens by turning to her grandmother Teta and her mother Samia narratives to represent a borderless world between Palestine and Syria. The text is not simply a nostalgic recounting of movement and travel in previous decades but attempts to reconstruct the past by problematizing the oppressive colonial regimes which have impeded Arab citizens' rights to travel freely.

Although the text is centred on Beit Jiddo and the events that unfold there, the house is the starting point for a series of journeys taken by the Baroudi women. The disintegration of the Ottoman era indirectly signals women's freedom to travel to and from their childhood and matrimonial homes. Although women gain autonomy to move freely, the establishment of Israel erases the freedom of Arab citizens as the region transforms to a space of checkpoints and closed borders. In order to develop this claim about mobility, I focus on a

topography of borders and crossings as well as how various sets of rituals are tied to olives to illustrate the treatment of multiple homecomings.

The text gives precedence to gustatory tropes, in particular the representation of olives. Samia's, Amiry's mother, arrival at Beit Jiddo, the family home in Damascus, is accompanied by a set of rituals tied to the house. She arrives at her childhood home with

three big suitcases and the two shining olive oil metal containers. Each of which held twenty gallons of extra virgin oil. [...] since 1942 when Mama had moved from Jordan to Jerusalem, she made sure she brought Aunt Laila 'her share' (which was in reality Teta's share) of olive oil from the family groves in 'Arrabeh. [...] Among them was the habit or 'tradition' [...] of ending every single meal with a piece of bread dipped into prime quality olive oil, accompanied by one black olive from 'Arrabeh. By now, the two gallons of olive oil had become the only connection left between the Abdulhadis and the Baroudis, or more accurately between Teta and her family, between Teta and her own village, and between Teta and her Palestine. (Amiry, 2016, p. 68)

Olives are used to tell a story about journeys, homecoming and family reunion. Although this scene depicts Samia's return to her family home, the emphasis is on Teta's hometown, 'Arrabeh. The passage depicts a multiscalar relationship between family, village and nation. This is seen through the use of a poetic triplet of personal and possessive pronouns: 'her family', 'her own village', and 'her Palestine'. The use of these pronouns connects to the triple preposition, 'between', to illustrate Teta's intimacies of family and place. The repetition of these two words describes her connection to Palestine. Additionally, the scene uncovers hybrid identities and positions. Samia is a Syrian living in Palestine while her mother is a Palestinian living in Syria. Both women live away from their native Damascus and 'Arrabeh. However, the olive bridges their separation to their childhood homes by uniting the family at the dining table. The journey that the olive oil makes between Palestine and Syria is not only indicative of Teta's connection to her childhood home, but also Amiry's own connection to both her Syrian and Palestinian roots.

Teta may no longer reside in 'Arrabeh but she is able to imaginatively return home through the consumption of olive oil from her family's groves in 'Arrabeh. Olives are an important symbol for Palestinians. Abufarha argues,

‘The olive tree symbol emphasizes traditions, community, connection with past Palestinian life in Palestine, and an example of the persistence of Palestinian life as un-ruined nationhood’ (2008, p. 355). The fruit from the tree which travels to the family home in Damascus illustrates how Teta is able to maintain her link to her Palestinian village. Despite the changing socio-political geographical backdrop of Greater Syria which was broken up in the mid twentieth century, the olive offers families like Amiry’s to sustain their Palestinian upbringing and livelihoods even in locations away from the lost nation state. In addition, olive trees represent resilience as they thrive in poor soil conditions; ‘[t]he fact that olive trees live and bear fruit for thousands of years is parallel to Palestinian history and continuity on the land’ (Patel, 2019). Many peasants and farmers live off their olive trees (Sleiman and Chebaro, 2018, p. 66). Although Teta’s Abdulhadi family became affluent merchants and tax collectors, their *fellah* identity is not lost as they still maintain the family groves.

The journey that Samia and the ‘two shining olive oil metal containers make’ is a transgressive act as she is transporting the family goods from occupied territory. The scene delineates an open Arab world that is accessible for its citizens to travel and transport goods between locales. Samia travels freely without the imposition of taxes on her goods, nor is she subjected to checkpoints which are commonplace today.¹ Amiry’s inclusion of olive oil as a recurrent image exemplifies a peaceful and conflict-free past to counterbalance the current situation of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

¹ Another contemporary reality is the annual occurrence of Israeli settlers destroying Palestinian olive groves. Based on data from the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem, Noor Ibrahim notes that, ‘Over 800,000 Palestinian olive trees have been uprooted by Israeli authorities and settlers since 1967’ (2019).

Conclusion

The comparative study of olives across both texts unearths a larger geopolitical framework of migration and mobility. This framework shows that the shifting socio-political backdrop affects families' affiliation to home and homeland and how they construct new political identity markers through certain types of food. I have argued that the olive is an important motif to exemplify questions on diaspora. I have demonstrated that the planting and harvesting olive trees, and the transporting and consumption of olive oil preserves and sustains culinary cultural traditions amongst diasporic communities such as Shadid's and Amiry's. *House of Stone* and *My Damascus* highlight coming to terms with the rupture of home; the writers aim to reconcile the loss of the homeland through transformative encounters. The olive is a locus of connection between the authors', their families, and the geographical backdrop. The fruit embodies past, present, and future of the writers' families and links it to imagination in a way to think about the hope, ideals and dreams surrounding home. Ultimately, dining on olives brings the writers closer – geographically, emotionally and imaginatively – to their Arab heritage and culture.

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