

SAEED TEEBI'S *WOODLAND*: CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT AND DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

This study is purposed to reveal cultural displacement and diaspora in Saeed Teebi's short story, *Woodland*. This story tells about an Algerian diaspora, Noor, and her experiences for being uprooted from her native country. Noor's experiences exemplify the complicated of mental and physical upheaval which also illustrate the long-lasting effects of relocation on personal identity. Her observations provide insights into the difficulties experienced by people of the diaspora as she makes her way through life in a new cultural setting. This study applies a concept of diaspora by Stuart Hall focusing on cultural displacement experienced by diaspora. This displacement relates to identity construction due to the process of leaving the homeland. Furthermore, it is a qualitative study with a thematic approach. The result of the study shows that Teebi's exploration of Noor's journey sheds light on the diverse dimensions of displacement, providing a nuanced understanding of the diaspora experience. Through Noor's narrative, the study contributes to the broader discussion on the complex nature of identity, belonging, and the persistent echoes of one's homeland in the lives of diaspora individuals.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are several countries that have notable diaspora populations. India boasts a significant diaspora spread across North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. China's diaspora is prominent in countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and Southeast Asian nations. Mexico has a substantial diaspora in the United States and other regions. Ireland and Italy also have considerable diasporas, with Irish communities in the U.S. and Australia and Italian communities in various continents. Interestingly, one of the largest diaspora individuals is Algerian diaspora. During the Civil War from 1992-2002, most of Algerian diaspora were found in France (Wright, 2011).

The history of the Algerian diaspora is a long story of migration, identity and resistance caused by various political, economic and social conditions. This journey began mainly during French colonialism, which had a significant influence in shaping the outflow of Algerians to various parts of the world. The French occupation of Algeria since 1830 was not a simple colonization. Algeria was made an integral part of French territory, and its colonial policies severely suppressed the lives of local people. Land owned by Algerian peasants was expropriated and transferred to European settlers, while the indigenous population was marginalized economically and politically. Colonialism created structural inequalities and narratives of domination that forced colonized peoples to seek freedom outside their own lands (Said, 1979).



Algeria's independence in 1962 was followed by unstable economic conditions and high unemployment in post-independence Algeria encouraged many citizens to seek a better life abroad. Moreover, their large numbers also allowed them to build Algerian communities in their hostlands. The trauma of war in their homeland has led the Algerian diaspora to build this kind of communities as a sign for longing to their homeland (Guemar et al., 2022). At least, there are Algerian communities found in France, Canada, Austria, Belgium, United Kingdom and United States. This Algerian diaspora created the second and third generations of the Algerian diaspora, who were born and raised in a foreign country but retained their Algerian roots and identity. This new generation faced challenges of acculturation and discrimination, they often used their homeland identity as a symbol of resistance to marginalization (Reiner et al., 1978).

Furthermore, as a country which is dominated by Muslim society, Algerian diaspora have to experience cultural clashes since they tend to be minority in hostlands. The tensions cannot be avoided by the Algerian diaspora since Christian are the majority in most of their hostlands. Consequently, cultural displacement becomes a part of diaspora struggles. Furthermore, the cultural displacement of diaspora also relates to the concept of 'home'. For Algerian diaspora, cultural negotiation is inevitable. They will consciously or unconsciously do this negotiation in their hostland. This cultural negotiation occurs through adapting new cultures of the hostland and maintaining religion and culture of the homeland. As a result, there is a shift in cultural identity of diaspora so that they can feel more secured in their new country (Shanneik, 2012). In the end, this can lead to cultural displacement.

The phenomenon of Algerian diaspora is also reflected in a short story, entitled *Woodland*, written by Saeed Teebi, a Palestinian Canadian writer. This fact enriches the perspective of Algerian voice from a non-Algerian diasporic writer. Moreover, Algerian diaspora is frequently captured in France for their largest community, but Teebi replaces this diaspora experiences to Canada which the diaspora characters engages with different cultural struggles. Thus, this study focuses on revealing the cultural displacement and diaspora experienced by Algerian diaspora in Teebi's *Woodland*.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several previous studies that relates to conducted study concerning on diaspora issues. First, a journal article published in 2023, entitled *Aspect of Diaspora and Cultural Displacement in Kiran Desai's Novel The Inheritance of Loss*, written by V. Shahiti Raj. This study engaged with experiences of diasporic characters in facing displacement due to the migration from India to United States of America. This study resulted that relocating to a new country can both give a chance to get a better life or to be treated as an alien (Raj, 2023). The next study was written by Nouzah Baba, entitled *Narrating Cultural Displacement and (Dis)Locating Beur Identity in Fouad Laroui's De Quel Amour Blesse*. This study examined a Moroccan migrant family who stay in France. They experienced contesting of homeland roots and reconstructing identity. This study resulted to intercultural identity faced by diaspora that lead to cultural displacement (Baba, 2023). These two studies discussed cultural displacement of diaspora characters in literary works written by the writers who share the same cultural background. They are representation of Indian diaspora by Indian writer (Kiran Desai) and Moroccan diaspora by Moroccan writer (Fouad



Laroui). However, this study conducts a different literary perspective. It examined cultural displacement experienced by Algerian diaspora as represented in *Woodland* who was written by a Palestinian writer, Saeed Teebi.

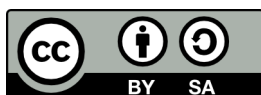
To engage with this issue, a concept of diaspora and cultural identity by Stuart Hall was applied. Cultural identity originates from somewhere but it is inconstant (Hall, 1996a). It implies that cultural identity may relate to cultural and historical backgrounds but it can be changeable due to current situations. Thus, cultural identity can be positioned and repositioned, especially when an individual is displaced from their homeland. They face cultural clashes because diaspora are required to comply with their new society (Mleiki, 2024). They will experience diversity, hybridity and differences that lead them to produce and reproduce themselves anew (Hall, 1996a). The diaspora needs to adapt themselves with new cultures in order to be accepted. They need to negotiate many things in their hostland. Consequently, diaspora individuals may face cultural displacement.

In fact, a cultural displacement can be chaotic for diaspora individuals. Since they are constituted to a new place, they keep recreating endless desire to return to the 'lost origin' all, 1996a). They experience an overwhelming nostalgia of the homeland. They have to endure the quest for belonging and the sense of longing to the homeland (Hemalatha, 2023). The feelings of alienation and stress become a part of diaspora's challenges (Palati et al., 2024). The diaspora character projects isolation for the adjustment they do in the hostland (Deshpande, 2018). The feeling of alienated and unhomed experienced by diaspora may lead them into identity confusing and trauma (Frak & Rushd, 2022).

The concept of cultural displacement appoints with detailed and varied experiences of individuals displaced from their homeland and dispersed across different regions or countries. This phenomenon involves not only the physical act of leaving one's place of origin but also the emotional and cultural dislocation that accompanies such a departure. In the context of diaspora, individuals grapple with a profound sense of displacement as they explore unfamiliar environments, often marked by distinct cultural norms and societal structures. This complex journey involves a complex negotiation of identity, as individuals strive to maintain connections to their roots while adapting to the challenges of their new surroundings. The term diaspora displacement, therefore, captures the layered dimensions of physical, emotional, and cultural upheaval experienced by those who find themselves distanced from the familiar landscapes of their homeland (Hall, 1996b).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative since it engages in revealing meaning of a social phenomenon. This study focused on capturing cultural displacement and diaspora in Saeed Teebi's *Woodland*. This study applied Stuart Hall's concept on diaspora to interpret this literary text. Cultural displacement and diaspora relate to individual's experience who feels displaced from their homeland due to moving in to a new land. To conduct a systematic analysis, the diaspora characters were first identified in the text. Then, both relevant narration and dialogues were selected through an in-depth reading. They were, then, categorized into two experiences of diaspora individuals which are relocation (leaving the homeland) and cultural displacement.



After that, the analysis was conducted through a thematic approach by connecting the theme with theoretical concept of diaspora. Lastly, the analysis was arranged in the form of essay.

In addition, researchers' understanding relied on diaspora and postcolonial concept. There is no connection between the researchers and Arabic society, especially Algerian diaspora. The researchers come from different social and cultural contexts represented in *Woodland*.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

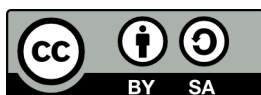
The term displacement of diaspora individuals encapsulates a various phenomenon characterized by the compelled or voluntary movement of people away from their homelands to other regions or countries. It embodies the dispersion of specific ethnic, cultural, or national groups, transcending the conventional boundaries of their homelands. The individuals within these diasporas find themselves part of communities, fostering a shared sense of identity amidst diverse geographical locations. There are many motivations for displacement within the context of diaspora, ranging from political conflicts and economic pressures to persecution or the pursuit of enhanced opportunities. This diverse array of catalysts results in diaspora individuals establishing new homes in various corners of the globe. In Teebi's *Woodland*, the cultural displacement and diaspora is depicted through several experiences.

4.1 Leaving the Homeland

The intricate process of departing one's homeland, a journey that extends far beyond the physical act of relocation. It delves into the profound emotional and psychological dimensions of severing ties with a place that holds deep personal and cultural significance. The diaspora character's decision to leave Algeria sets the stage for an exploration of the weightiness and enduring impact of such a departure. This departure signifies not only a change in physical location but also a transformative shift in the individual's sense of self and belonging.

When I left for Canada, I severed all my contacts in Algeria. I didn't tell anyone where I was going, which country or even which continent. But on my night runs, I imagined members of my family in the silhouettes darkening the lit windows that I passed. I imagined them looking at me and wondering at the lunacy of this galloping woman. (Teebi, 2021)

The character's motivations for leaving Algeria and moved to Canada, whether driven by economic necessity, political unrest, or personal aspirations, the decision to uproot oneself is a complex interplay of various factors. It is a momentous choice that carries with it a blend of hope, apprehension, and perhaps a tinge of nostalgia. It can be seen when the diaspora character wants to leave Canada and cuts ties with everyone in Algeria, but she still expects her family member to miss her a lot. Leaving home is not a mere physical departure; it is an emotional unraveling, a process that requires grappling with the ghosts of memories and cultural roots. It creates homesickness, nostalgia, and the struggle to reconcile the past with an uncertain future. The process of identity reconstruction experienced by the individual in the quotation above reveals a dynamic and complex journey. The decision to cut off all contact and start a new life in a faraway place is a conscious effort to break away from the past and build a new identity. The inner conflict between homesickness and expectations of the future colors this journey. The night run became a symbol of self-discovery and an attempt to overcome anxiety.



Was I the first one to pine for the freedom, the tingling uncertainty, of being alone in a new world? (Teebi, 2021)

Through vivid descriptions and introspective reflections, it seeks to capture the emotional turbulence of bidding farewell to one's homeland. Cultural crossroads explores the conflict between cultural backgrounds and the difficulty of balancing one's identity in strange places as seen through Noor's experiences. The story develops as a striking depiction of the difficulties and changes that come with seeking a fresh start, connecting with the more general investigation of the human experience of departing from one's cultural roots.

Finally, leaving the homeland for diaspora character leads to cultural displacement since there is a process of identity construction when a diaspora is in between the homeland and the hostland. It can be seen in the quotation below.

Later, when I told Shareef that I was leaving, I lied and said I was going back to Algeria to live with my family, and that I didn't want him to come with me. (Teebi, 2021)

The sentence illustrates an interesting picture of the complexity of identity construction as the effect of leaving the home. By lying about the purpose of his departure, the character is not only giving false information, but is also actively constructing a new narrative about herself. This narrative serves as a kind of mask that hides his true identity and the motivation behind his decision to leave. This action can be seen as an attempt to break away from the ties of the past and form a new identity that is more in line with his expectations or perception of the ideal self. Consequently, this conflict takes a role in cultural displacement of a diaspora individual. In fact, for diaspora, leaving the home can both happiness and regret at the same time. It can be seen in the quotation below.

It was better than any feeling I'd had in North Africa, or in my old basement in the city, or with anyone. Every escape I had ever made felt correct. (Teebi, 2021)

The quotation above describes a feeling of happiness and satisfaction that the diaspora character has never felt before. This feeling is stronger than it has ever been in North Africa, her homeland. It illustrates that the diaspora character is experiencing a significant transformation of identity. This feeling may be related to a new experience, a new relationship, or a deep self-discovery. In term of of identity construction, this condition shows that one's identity can change and evolve with life experiences. The feeling of happiness the character feels may be the result of her process in constructing a new identity as the effect of leaving the home.

4.2 Cultural Displacement and Diaspora

The experience of displacement holds profound implications for individuals within a diaspora. It becomes a pivotal factor shaping their sense of belonging, cultural identity, and ties to community. Diaspora communities, resilient in their adaptability, often navigate the delicate balance between preserving their cultural heritage and traditions while simultaneously integrating with and adapting to their new environments. However, the narrative at hand varied from the conventional diaspora tale, as it unfolds a unique story of individuals attempting to sever ties



with their roots and homeland, driven by a complex interplay of reasons and the enduring echoes of trauma.

“For our second date, he took me to an auction in Stouffville. I thought, How small can a town be? We were in a community centre hall with yellow-stained drop ceilings. At the registration desk there was a pair of metal coffee Thermoses, regular and decaf, unlabelled.” (Teebi, 2021).

The narrator (Noor) of this short story excerpt said that she appears perplexed because this is her first experience dating at an auction. It's evidence that she is stepping into a new area of her life that she never experienced or knew back home. The date is made more interesting and maybe even a little unusual by the location, which is a little town. The reference to the community center hall with its drop ceilings tinted yellow conjures up images of an ordinary or unimpressive scene. The lack of labels on the coffee thermoses may represent a lack of formality or pretension, supporting the notion that this date is distinguished by its modest demeanor.

“When someone dies, all their friends gather to see if they can buy the things they had their eye on while the person was alive,” Shareef said (Teebi, 2021).

Shareef made this statement since this is not a familiar culture for both him and Noor. In Canada, holding an auction following a death is customary. They never found this habit in their homeland country. The way of these two characters compares their hostland and them to cultural displacement.

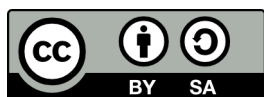
Then, as a diaspora, Noor, never erased her longing to her homeland even though it is her own choice to leave Algeria.

Most evenings, I went for a run. I'm not a natural runner, unlike Shareef, but I am a natural escapee. I run almost with my eyes closed, imagining that I am fleeing to the mountains of North Africa — my home — with my hair travelling behind me like a streak (Teebi, 2021).

In the quotation above, Teebi reveals how diaspora character experiences cultural displacement because she always has a dream to go back to her homeland country. The phrase *fleeing to the mountains of North Africa* shows that for the diaspora, homeland consistently becomes a place for her to celebrate her life. Her imagination on *my hair travelling behind me like a streak* illustrates how she feels more to live her life if she spends a whole life in her homeland country. It is also strengthened by this following quotation.

Primitive, traditional designs about things like spirituality and healing and such.” It reminded me of the way Arabs in Algeria spoke of my grandmother's Kabyle tattoos, or her embroidery. It also made me think of my home, and the mess I'd left in my wake. (Teebi, 2021)

The passage arouses feelings of cultural significance and ancestor-related behavior. It's around this point that memories of home begin to surface. This suggests that there is a gap in his life as a result of the departure. The reference to the tagine's irreversible degradation while



recognizing the young that remains implies an appreciation for both the narrator's shortcomings and youth, and hence, potential. This implies a tension between the quest of knowledge and autonomy and traditional values. Family strife results from the narrator's decision to pursue further education, which is perceived as a break from traditional responsibilities.

The next quotation well conveys the complex network of feelings, regrets, and repercussions that come with leaving one's native country in the setting of a diaspora.

Most of all, I thought of the mountains that hugged our tiny village, that circumscribed our world. I missed those mountains, even if I always longed to escape their embrace.

My dreams that night were of Shareef and me again, travelling together in the mountains. Wistful now, suffused with the glum calls of birds that I never heard in Algeria. Our trails were murky and unknown, like neither of us knew where we were going. (Teebi, 2021)

The section describes how the narrator is going through pain for being shadowed by her homeland. The diaspora's memory has been permanently altered by her longing to the homeland. The phrase *our tiny village* demonstrates her willingness to always be a part of her homeland. The phrase *missed those mountains* pictures her unfamiliarity to her hostland which lead her to cultural displacement.

At home, in bed together, I visualized Shareef with me in the pockets of North Africa's forests, high, high above. The dense trees below us looked like clumps of cotton, like thick, verdant curls. He called me Noora, like my family did when I was a child. I wanted to forge ahead. (Teebi, 2021)

The diaspora in this story faces an alienated environment that forces her to feel loneliness. The narrative develops as a gripping examination of the fallout from such a purposeful detachment, providing insights into the deep inner struggles. This story reveals a unique thread that speaks to the rejections of creating a new identity in the hostland. The phrase *called me Noora, like my family did* reveals that her homeland identity is always her first choice.

The study illustrates the tremendous effects of forced or voluntary migration on people's sense of cultural identity, community relationships, and sense of belonging via the prism of personal experiences. *Later, when I told Shareef that I was leaving, I lied and said I was going back to Algeria to live with my family, and that I didn't want him to come with me.* The emotional and cultural aspects of displacement are addressed to diaspora character, which highlight the cultural displacement.

5. CONCLUSION

The diaspora experience in Teebi's *Woodland* is encapsulated by the concept of identity displacement, covered by isolation and unfamiliarity, which depicts the emotional struggle of people adjusting to new circumstances without the reassuring familiarity of their native country. The story deftly captures the conflict between the past and present, capturing the heart of the diaspora experiencing a deep need for connection amidst the challenges of adjusting to a foreign land. The story's portrayal of a fight with social standards illuminates the psychological cost of



conforming to cultural norms and expectations. This issue speaks to the experience of being in the diaspora more broadly, where people have to balance maintaining cultural traditions with fitting in with a new social structure. The story prompts contemplation on the shared challenge of managing societal norms and the perseverance needed to carve out a genuine route among the intricacies of living abroad. In summary, these varied accounts work together to provide a complex picture of cultural displacement in diaspora. Moreover, this study contributes to give a wide-ranging understanding in voicing Algerian diaspora's identity displacement by positioning it in Canadian perspective rather than in the more commonly background of France and its colonial history with Algeria.

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