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**Asst. Prof. Arwa Hussein  
Mohammed (Ph.D.)**

Department of English, College of Education,  
Tikrit University

**Ali Mohammed Saadon, M.A  
Candidate**

Department of English, College of Education for  
Humanities, University of Wasit

\* Corresponding author: E-mail :  
[dr.arwa.hussein@tu.edu.iq](mailto:dr.arwa.hussein@tu.edu.iq)

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## The Testimony of Tablets in Dunya Mikhail's Poetry

### A B S T R A C T

The formation of diasporic identity is inextricably linked to the collective memory of home culture: its history and traumatic experiences. This study argues that there is a vast connection between diaspora and traumatic memories of the past and that both affect the formation of the exilic identity. It tackles significant concepts such as diaspora, displacement trauma, home, and nostalgia. This study focuses on the poetry of the Iraqi-American poet Dunya Mikhail (1965–). Besides, it discusses how Mikhail adopted a new type of poetry called Tablet poetry. In addition, it significantly shows how diasporic experiences and traumatic memories can affect the formation of the identity of first-generation immigrants. It contends that what happened in the past will affect immigrants in the present and that they will be permanently haunted by it.

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## شهادة الألواح في شعر دنيا ميخائيل

ا.م.د. أروى حسين محمد/ جامعة تكريت/ كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية/ قسم اللغة الانكليزية

علي محمد سعدون/ جامعة واسط / كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية / قسم اللغة الانكليزية

### الخلاصة:

يرتبط بناء هوية الشتات ارتباطاً وثيقاً بالذكريات الجماعية بثقافة البلد الأم: تأريخها و تجاربها المؤلمة. إذ تناقش هذه الدراسة بأن هنالك علاقة واسعة بين الهجرة والتجارب الصادمة في الماضي وأن كلاهما يؤثر على تشكيل هوية المهاجرين في الشتات. تتناول هذه الدراسة أيضاً , بعض المفاهيم المهمة مثل: الهجرة، صدمات النزوح، الوطن والحنين. تركز هذه الدراسة على شعر الشاعرة العراقية-الأمريكية دنيا

ميخائيل (1965-). وعلاوة على ذلك، ان هذه الدراسة تناقش كيف استخدمت الشاعرة ميخائيل قصائد الألواح في شعرها. كما تُظهر هذه الدراسة بشكل كبير، الطريقة التي يمكن أن تؤثر بها تجارب الشتات والذكريات المؤلمة على تشكيل هوية الجيل الأول من المهاجرين. فضلا عن ذلك، فإنها تؤكد، أن ما حدث في الماضي سيؤثر على المهاجرين في الحاضر و سيطاردتهم بشكل دائم.

*الكلمات المفتاحية: الهجرة، الهوية، صدمات النزوح، الوطن، الحنين، دنيا ميخائيل، قصائد الألواح*

## Introduction

In recent years, 'diaspora' has become a global problem that affects practically everyone's lives. It is no longer specific to the Jewish diaspora or any particular country. It has a more significant impact on people's lives. It is caused by various reasons, including colonization, war, political unrest, tyrannical rulers, economic factors, and poverty. Most diaspora occurs due to colonialism and the post-colonial era that followed. It is one of the detrimental effects of post-colonialism. Diaspora itself causes a lot of effects on people's lives and has its waste. Displacement trauma, traumatic memories, nostalgia, and home longing are all the effects of diaspora.

Many theories about the etymology of 'diaspora', and many believe that the word's root is derived from various cultures. According to Kevin Kenny (2013), the Greek term 'diaspora' originates from the verb "diaspeirein", which is a combination of the words "dia" for over or through and "speirein" for scattering or sow (p.20). The word comes from the proto-Indo-European root "spr", which can be found in words like "spore, sperm, spread, and disseminate" in English. On the other hand, William Safran (2005) argues that the term 'diaspora' is derived from the Jewish word "galut" (p. 36). He believes that this term evokes oppression, discrimination, and legal constraints.

The term 'diaspora' has evolved over time to have a wide-ranging meaning. It was only in the 1980s that the term became well-known to describe individuals who

had been displaced from their birthplace. As Walker Connor (1986) states, 'diaspora' is a group of individuals living beyond their motherland (p.16). Diaspora has something to do with scattering and dispersal in all of its shapes.

During the past decades, researchers have increasingly focused on the phenomenon of diaspora. Many researchers discuss the concept of 'diaspora' and its effect on a particular nation. Others discuss the concept as a political issue, while others adapt it and connect it to a literary work.

In her thesis, *Theories of Identity Formation among Immigrants: Examples from People with an Iraqi Kurdish Background in Sweden* (2014), Areen Sulyman portrays the formation and construction of the identity development of immigrants through their cultural encounters with a new society. This study attempts to give voice to four Iraqi Kurds, who came to Sweden at six months, nine years, twenty-two, and twenty-seven years, to interpret issues about their identity construction and belonging. Throughout interviews, this study concludes that the host country is considered the real home country for those who arrived very young. In addition, the interviews show that the informants, in one way or another, attempt to integrate into Swedish society and maintain their Kurdish identity.

Hana Ghena investigated the exilic experience of the Iraqi poet Adnan Al-Sayegh who was forced to leave his homeland in the early 1990s, in her paper entitled *Between Home and Exile: A Reading of the Exilic Experience of the Iraqi Poet Adnan Al-Sayegh* (2016). In this study, she argues the circumstances that forced Al-Sayegh into self-exile, the concept of exile, its nature, and its consequences. Moreover, she analyzes selected poems that express Al-Sayegh's deep sense of dislocation and disaffection in his new host lands. She concludes that exile as a physical, geographical, and psychological state of being is a basic condition in Al-Sayegh's poetry and life.

On May 2018, Abdulla Majeed investigates how exile is shaped and how the homeland is imagined, remembered, and performed, in his thesis *Unsettling the*

*Homeland: Fragments of Home and Homeland among Iraqi Exiles in Amman, Jordan.*

This study explores: Why certain narratives and elements of the past are employed while other elements are forgotten or silenced when individual narrators reflect on home and homeland? How do these elements, practices, and memories associated with the homeland feature in exilic life, and what does it tell us about the notion of home, the possibility of homemaking in exile, and the role of homeland nostalgia? This study shows that there is no singular or 'authentic' construction of the homeland, and instead, these representations are rooted in the diverse subjectivities of Iraqi exiles.

In the same year, Rose Hattab explores the generational demarcation and the concept of the 'reluctant immigrant' in thinking about place attachment and displacement in her thesis *Iraqi Diaspora in Arizona: Identity and Homeland in Women's Discourse*. This study argues that the sense of belonging to the homeland is a theme in the diasporic narratives of Iraqi women. In addition, it shows how the immigrants reach out to the imagined homeland to manage the emotional trauma of exile, while diasporic imagination engages the construction of immigrant identity and the political ramifications of this identity in the receiving country.

In terms of the poet Dunya Mikhail, researchers discuss her poetry from the standpoint of the voice of women in wars, opposing wars, and the psychological effects of wars on women. In 2008, Lamees Al-Athari studied Mikhail's poetry from the perspective of how women protest wars and the role of Iraqi women in conflicts in her thesis *This rhythm does not Please Me: Women Protest War in Dunya Mikhail's Poetry*. In this study, Al-Athari seeks to give women a voice in her argument and establishes that their roles are subjective rather than objective. Bag of Bones, The War Works Hard, Inanna, An Urgent Call, To Any Other Place, The Prisoner, and The Cup are among the poems from Mikhail's collection *The War Works Hard* (2005) that have been chosen to investigate the topic of this thesis.

Unlike Lamees Al-Athari, Sarah Alsaden argues in her thesis, *Poetry as Resistance and Recovery: An Examination of Violence, Trauma, and Exile in the Poetry of Iraqis and American Veterans of the Iraq War* (2013), that both Iraqi civilians and exiles as well as American veterans of the Iraq War, have written poems and stories that primarily deal with the experience of war and its aftermath. Alsaden examines the poetry of both groups—Iraqis and American veterans of the Iraq War to emphasize how their poems concentrate on the destructive effects of war. In Chapter Two, she analyses the poem "Buzz" by Mikhail as a symbol of how traumatic memories affect war survivors.

In her dissertation, *Defragmenting Identity in the Life Narratives of Iraqi North American Women* (2014), Lamees Al Ethari analyses modern Iraqi North American women's life narratives within the framework of post-colonial autobiography theory. This study illustrates how war, oppression, being away from loved ones, and exile interfere with either the narrators' daily lives or the lives of their friends and family members. In this study, Al-Ethari addresses Mikhail's poetry; however, she tackles her volume *A Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea* (2009).

On the other hand, Amal Boumaaza examines three Iraqi female poets in her thesis, *War in Iraqi Feminist Writings* (2016). She discusses the Iraqi poet Mikhail in chapter four of her thesis. She studies three of Mikhail's poems from the standpoint of opposing wars. She does not tackle her poetry as a diasporic or self-exiled poet. "The Iraqi Night", "The War Works Hard", and "America" are the selected poems that have been chosen to discuss the topic of this thesis.

In 2020, Shamaila Amir argued for the psychological impact of war on Iraqi women in general and widows in particular in her paper *Psychological Effects of War on Women in Iraq: An Analysis in the Light of Dunya Mikhail's Poem "The Cup"*. This study looks into the psychological suffering of women who have lost loved ones in battle and are now facing physical and psychological abuse.

In terms of the current study, this paper connects diaspora and trauma, showing their effect on first-generation immigrants. As it is common that diaspora is a key concept in post-colonial theory, whereas trauma is a branch theory of psychoanalysis, this study argues that both are intertwined since they work together to form the exilic identity. Besides, it investigates the psychological effect of some significant concepts such as displacement trauma, traumatic memories, home, and nostalgia and shows how they are all associated with diaspora. It explains that all those concepts affect the immigrants' exilic identity formation. In addition, this study discusses a new type of poetry dubbed "Tablet" poems. Dunya Mikhail writes this new type of poetry in two volumes, *The Iraqi Nights* (2014) and *In Her Feminine Sign* (2019), to merge the past and the present of Iraq. This study shows how diaspora and traumatic memories affect Mikhail's life and how they are reflected in writing the "Tablet" poems.

### 1.1 Diaspora: A Critical survey

According to Imran Majeed Bhat (2015), 'Diaspora' is not a new phenomenon in the globe or people's lives. It has existed since the dawn of time (p. 6). It existed in prehistoric periods and since the beginning of creation. Glimpses of it are found in holy texts such as the Bible and the Holy Quran. Diaspora had existed since the beginning of time when Adam and Eve were exiled for disobeying God. With time, diaspora has become increasingly important in people's lives: first, the exodus of Jews from Palestine and Egypt; the Armenian diaspora; the African and, recently, the Asian diaspora. In recent years, diaspora has become a global issue that has impacted the lives of almost everyone (Bhat, 2015, p. 6).

Diaspora is a key concept in post-colonial theory and is the core of this study. As a result, it is worthwhile to emphasize the relationship between diaspora and post-colonial theory. A body of post-colonial theory is a body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social

impacts of European colonial rule around the world in the 18th through 20th centuries (Atuahene, 2021, p. 3). The impact of colonization on cultures and communities is the subject of post-colonialism. During the late 1970s, literary critics used the term 'post-colonialism' to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization. As the term implies, 'post-colonialism' refers to the period following colonialism in which the colonized took their rightful place by gaining freedom and conquering political and cultural imperialism. In general, post-colonialism appears to follow colonialism linearly. However, even in the post-colonial era, we see colonialism as a new colonialism, which gives rise to new diasporic movements such as those in Palestine and Afghanistan (Bhat, 2015, p. 1).

The post-colonial theory comes in various forms and interventions, but they all share the same primary claim that the world we live in is impossible to comprehend without considering the history of imperialism and colonialism. One of those primary forms is diaspora. Diaspora is one of the most crucial concepts in post-colonial theory. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2013) argue that "diaspora is an essential aspect of colonialism's history. Colonialism was a radically diasporic movement, involving the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions of Europeans worldwide "(p. 61). It is inextricably linked to colonialism, as this historical state caused people to be displaced throughout the globe under various circumstances or kinds of compulsion. In reality, the connection between diaspora and colonialism is significantly more complicated. Whether or not the people of the diaspora were settlers, migrants, transported prisoners, enslaved people, or laborers, what matters is colonialism's ability to establish many forms of power that coerced people to move (Ashcroft et al., 2013, pp. 67-68).

There are numerous hypotheses about the origins of the term 'diaspora', with many claiming that the word's root comes from various cultures. Stephane Dufoix (2008) states that "diaspora is a Greek word derived from the verb 'diaspeiro', which was used as early as the 5th century B.C. by Sophocles, Herodotus, and Thucydides"



(p. 4). The 5th century B.C. saw a rise in the use of the verb 'diaspeiro', which had a pejorative connotation among Hellenistic writers and classical philosophers. In his philosophical treatises, Epicurus reportedly used the term 'diaspora' to describe processes of dispersion and breakdown, dissolution into diverse components with no further connection to one another (Unnik, 1993, p. 86).

On the other hand, a professor of political science, William Safran (2005), states that the term "diaspora comes from the Jewish word galut" (p. 36). According to him, this word connotes discrimination, legal restrictions, oppression, and a frequently hard adjustment to a host country whose hospitality is erratic and fleeting. It also denotes the presence of an expatriate community on foreign soil, who see their presence as temporary. Similar to Safran's argument for the origins of diaspora is the French writer Alain Médam's (1993) statement that "... diaspora concept, arising primarily from the Jewish experience of exile and dispersion, must be actualized and refined" (p. 1).

The Septuagint (a Greek version of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament) distinguished between 'galut' and 'dispersion', two closely intimate ideas that ultimately became muddled in Jewish history. Initially, the Hebrew term 'galut' or 'golus', which means banishment or exile, alluded to Babylonian captivity. The Septuagint used several phrases (most commonly apoikia) to translate the negative term 'galut' into Greek, ranging from migration to captivity. On the other hand, 'dispersion' was employed to depict the spiritual dimension of divinely inflicted exile, or 'za-avah'. The Hebrew term 'za-avah' means a horror, trouble, or object of trembling, rather than the Babylonian captivity or any actual occurrence in human history. These disparate ideas appear to have blended over time into a singular concept of diaspora as an exile, sorrow, and possible redemption (Kenny, 2013, p.24).

The term 'diaspora' has taken on a multi-dimensional connotation with time. It was only during the 1980s that the term acquired popularity to describe people who



had been separated from their birthplace. Until 1993, the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defined the term 'diaspora' as "... all those Jews who live outside the biblical land of Israel". But the same year, the dictionary added the following definition: "the situation of people living outside their traditional homeland" (cited in Sheffer, 2003, p. 9). The dictionary's first explanation may be argued to link the diaspora to a religious connotation, but the latter explanation provides the groundwork for a more modern definition.

The nationalist and Professor of Political Science at Middlebury College, Walker Connor (1926–2017), also defines diaspora with a generalization not merely related to the Jews' diaspora. In his article *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (1986), Connor defines diaspora as "that segment of a people living outside their homeland" (p.16). In all its forms, diaspora has something to do with scattering and dispersal. Safran (2005) states that "Diaspora refers to minority communities whose members share mutual characteristics such as immigration, displacement, collective memory and myth of homeland, hyphenation as well as a sense of partial alienation" (p. 38). Hence, diaspora is no longer limited to the Jewish diaspora; it has evolved into a global issue affecting nearly every part of the globe.

## **2.1 The Role of Traumatic Experiences and Memories in Forming the Diasporic Identity**

The issue of traumatic memories standing at a distance both temporally and physically is at the heart of the concept of diaspora (Brah, 1996, p. 180). The history of the connection between diaspora and traumatic memories is almost as old as diaspora itself. Because traumatic memories are the consequences of diaspora, both are in the same vein in affecting the migrant's life. Most diasporic people are compelled to leave their countries, so they live in a mental struggle full of traumatic memories and suffering. 'Trauma' is derived from the Greek verb *titrosko*, which means to wound or to pierce. The Greek term maintains the uncertainty between bodily and psychological

harm, with no clear differentiation made between the two. Today, however, we commonly use the term 'trauma' to refer to emotional or psychological harm rather than physical pain. If someone claims to have been traumatized, we think he has had a terrifying or disturbing encounter. Therefore, we focus on the emotional impact rather than any physical harm. 'Trauma' is generally thought of as a pathological mental and emotional condition, harm to the psyche produced by catastrophic events, or the fear of such occurrences that overwhelm an individual's standard response mechanisms (Kurtz, 2018, pp. 1-2, pp. 240-241).

Cathy Caruth (1955–) states, in her book *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), that "The problem was that you did not always know what you were seeing until later, maybe years later, that a lot of it never made it in at all, it just stayed stored there in your eyes" (p.10). Horrific memories can cause a person to have no conscious memory of the event and only experience it through the traumatic repetitions described previously. In other words, traumatic experiences are either inaccessible to the individual or indirectly accessible. Caruth's (1996) use of the wound metaphor is inspired by Sigmund Freud's usage of the wound and voice parable to state that "trauma seems to be much more than pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche" (p.73). It is the story of a wound that cries out and addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.

Displacement is a traumatic experience that can follow a migrant's life. Most diasporic people are affected by the displacement and the traumatic memories of their homeland. Wars, religious persecution, political or economic triggers, loss of property, and starvation are all possible reasons that force people to leave their homeland. The displacement may last for months or even years. It could be the experience of a single writer or intellectual, voluntarily or forcibly exiled, or the displacement of an entire community (Kurtz, 2018, p.15).

In her book *Arab Voices in Diaspora* (2009), Layla Al-Maleh, a Professor of English literature, comments on the diasporic individual's complicated feelings of home. She states that "diasporic individuals find themselves in a confusing and puzzling situation because both the past and current communities are partly unreachable" (p. 455). If the diasporic individuals' new home rejects their identity, customs, and way of life, they will be unable to root themselves in the new environment. William Safran discusses how diasporic identity is not "fixed or pre-given" because it is formed in the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories, we tell ourselves individually and collectively (cited in Brah, 1996, p. 179). Traumatic memories are like an obstacle in the diasporic individual's life that he cannot pass easily. Between the imagined and real versions of his homeland community, there will be a chasm.

According to the first generation of immigrants, identification with a homeland may be accompanied by emotions of alienation when assigned to a home one has never lived in or denied belonging by individuals who still live there. They try to re-create the homeland in their imaginations since they do not feel at home in their current residence, yet the country they picture can never be accurate. When a diasporic person returns to his country after a long absence, he invariably finds himself in a location that is not precisely what he expected. And now, despite feeling a sense of belonging when he thinks of his hometown, he cannot help but feel out of place once he is there. Similarly, the new land can be a source of identification and negative "othering" experiences (Rushdie, 1991, p. 56; Al-Maleh, 2009, p. 455).

Because the material world has no value in and of itself, arguably the most relevant way to conceive of the home's symbolic quality is as a signifier of this world rather than as something separate from it. It is not the location that is home; home is not a geographical location but rather internally located by individuals (Duyvendak, 2011, p. 37). This means the material world has no intrinsic "home value" and requires meanings and emotions to be linked to it. In his book *At Home in the World* (1995),

Michael Jackson (1940- ) states that "home is grounded less in a place and more in the activity that occurs in the place" (p.148). Therefore, home is more of a process of one's making than a result of the place itself. It is due to the immigrants themselves to create feelings like security, belonging, and safety for places over time. We do not feel at home everywhere or with everyone, so it is a highly man-made emotion. Feeling at ease appears to necessitate including some and ignoring many. When the home is everywhere, and we feel at ease with everyone, the word "home" loses its significance. Feeling at home is a vital experience for everyone, but it is also a unique phenomenon: nobody feels at home everywhere or with everyone (Duyvendak, 2011, p. 106). Home is not a material object but rather emotion and a set of senses.

Home and nostalgia are related to each other. As stated above, home is more concerned with its spiritual than its physical value. According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "home can be a synonym for origin", meaning "someone's or something's place of origin, or a place where a person thinks they belong". Though dictionaries may describe home in this way, for all of us, but notably for hyphenated peoples and specifically for Arab-Americans, the current experience or perception of the concept of home has profoundly changed. Due to the quick speed of life and the continual internal fights over matters of allegiance, home no longer equals a safe place but rather a site of conflict and instability. Immigrants feel nostalgia for the spiritual value of the home more than for its location. Nostalgia is a well-known psychological concept that has a solid link to home and memories. It is a fundamental idea influenced by diaspora and reflects on the lives of immigrants (Rozveh & Faramarzi, 2017, p. 531).

The word 'nostalgia' is derived from the Greek words "nostos", which means return, and "algos", which means pain. According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, "nostalgia is a type of grief generated by a lengthy period of separation from one's home". So in this combination, the words pain and return are crucial to assure that 'nostalgia' is a psychological, not an organic disease. From a psychopathological

viewpoint, nostalgia is a dream of the glorious past, a past that no longer exists and cannot be rebuilt. Nostalgia is a yearning for simpler times and comparing the past with the present. As a result, longing for and remembering the past can bring sadness and grief. Humans are saddened by their absence from their ideal location and their social, political, and cultural circumstances. Their current life circumstances are generally unfavorable (Rozveh & Faramarzi, 2017, p. 531).

Taking into consideration the experience of the Arab diaspora in the United States, it is worth mentioning that immigration to the United States of America has a long history. It dates back to the seventeenth century and continues to the present day. People from all over the world come to America for various reasons, including political, religious, and economic ones. The term "Arab-American" does not have a long history. It was only recently fashioned to match similar appellations such as African-American, Asian-American, and many more that reflect negotiated identities. The hyphen suggests that the two components of the noun are in some way balanced or even in tension. In other ways, hyphenation challenges the ancient metaphor of the "melting pot", implying identities that appear to resist "melting" or dissolving in mainstream America. With the rise of multiculturalism, ethnic consciousness, and ethnic pride, the hyphenated term adapts well to modern speech, proudly asserting hybridity and gently claiming space (Al-Maleh, 2009, pp. 423-424). The hyphen represents a conflict between the past (the homeland) and the present (the host country). Each eye is drawn to a separate side of the hyphen that connects the two terms of the cultural inscription. As if they are two distinct identities attempting to coexist within the same person (Al-Samman, 2000, p. 325).

Arab- American experience of hyphenation has proved to be one of the most successful and fruitful diaspora experiences across time. Arab-Americans have made significant contributions to literature, poetry, music, art, business, finance, and a variety of other aspects of American cultural, political, industrial, and economic life. Poetry is one of the most visible contributions of Arab-American immigrants to

American culture (Daniels, 2006, p. 6). Arab-American poets find in poetry a way through which they can express the dilemma of the Arab diaspora. In recent years, Arab-American poetry has emerged as a significant literary form in the United States. Poets of Arab descent in the United States are well aware that poetry is one of the most effective means of overcoming racial and linguistic barriers. As a result, Arab-American poetry has blossomed, with a significant increase in publication. The success of Arab-American poets marks a significant shift in the social and political status of Arabs in America. They can now use poetry to establish new spaces for their voices (Majaj, 2008, pp. 3-4).

### **3.1 Dunya Mikhail: Biography, Diasporic Experience and Identity**

When wars prevail in a country, traumatic memories, horror, and diaspora will shape the lives of its people. Over four decades, Iraq indulged in four destructive wars, which left bloody scars in Iraq's history. Because every war has its after-war: depression, nightmares, political and social upheavals, the lives of Iraqis have been disrupted in every sufferable way. Iraqis lost their houses, family members, and lovers. They could only stand by and watch as their country was torn apart by the chaos of war, rebellion, and sectarian violence erupted during the four Iraq wars (Lieberman, 2008, pp. 41-42).

Iraqi writers attempted to convey the Iraqi experience through their literature during the thirty years of agony. However, due to severe censorship before 2003, most Iraqi writers could not portray the actual suffering of their people. As a result, pro-war slogans and celebrations of the 1980s and 1990s dominated Ba'ath-era literature. Only a few writers have attempted to depict Iraqi suffering through the use of multiple layers of metaphors to conceal the true meanings. Those writers faced feuds and danger from censorship and were considered enemies of the Ba'ath regime. However, poets and writers got their freedom after 2003 and could freely express their ideas (Lieberman, 2008, pp. 44-46).

Mikhail (1965–) is an Iraqi-American writer. She was born into a minority Christian family in Baghdad. She lived during a period of political upheaval in Iraq and lived through two of the country's four destructive wars: the Iraq-Iran War (1980–1988), the First Gulf War (1991), and the sanctions that followed. She worked as a journalist and translator for the Baghdad Observer after graduating from the University of Baghdad with a BA in English literature. Mikhail is a remarkable Iraqi poet with a powerful context of war, trauma, and exile from a woman's perspective. She began writing poetry at a very young age. Mikhail began to publish her poems in the mid-1980s while she was a student at the University of Baghdad. She published her poems at a time when writers who dared to criticize the ruling authorities through their work were often threatened (Khan, 2015, pp. 10-13).

As a result of revolutionizing the form and content of war poetry, Mikhail states in an interview with Kalpna Singh-Chitnis (2017), "In the Iraqi media, they called us the war generation poets" (p. 3). Due to her war poetry, Mikhail is known as one of the war generation poets who wrote during that period. Her work portrays the Iraqi experience through thirty years of war and even the present wars surrounding Iraq and its people. Saadi Simawe writes in the introduction of *The War Works Hard* (2005) that "Mikhail writes modern poetry instead of slogans and dead metaphors..., political clichés and classical metrical patterns" (pp. vi, viii).

Mikhail's poetry followed no rules. "The poem brings its form for me. I don't feel the need to follow any previous rules", she says (Personal contact via Gmail app, July 2, 2022). Mikhail employs free forms of poetry in her work to create "compassionate and startling poetry" that addresses the Iraqi people's suffering as a result of wars, sanctions, repression, and genocide (Simawe & Weissbort, 2003, p. 270).

Due to censorship and interrogation under the Ba'ath regime, Mikhail fled to the USA in the mid-1990s. Firstly, she escaped to Jordan, where she lived for nine



months, and then to the USA, where she earned a hyphen for her identity and became Iraqi-American. She settled in Detroit and graduated from Wayne State University with a master's degree in Near Eastern studies. Mikhail was compelled to flee her homeland to write poetry without fear of censorship. Her emotion of loss for her homeland pervades her writing, which is not tolerated under dictatorial rule (Khan, 2015, p.10-13).

In 1995, she published her volume *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*. This volume was censored and flagged by the Iraqi government. As a result, her life was threatened, and she was recommended to depart the country as soon as possible. The irony is that she had to leave because of her poetry, but it was like poetry paid her back. Mikhail states, "I was able to leave on time because "my profession is a poet" was inscribed in my passport, and that required no paperwork that the other professions would demand in passing the Iraqi border to the outside" (Montagne, 2013, para. 5). Poetry saved Mikhail's life.

#### **4.1 Tablet Poems in Mikhail's volumes *The Iraqi Nights* (2014) and *In Her Feminine Sign* (2019)**

Mikhail writes a new type of poetry, which is a short piece of poetry called "tablets" or "flash poetry". It is inspired by the language economy tradition traced in Japanese Hakiue and Anglo-American imagist poetry (Hiraga, 1998, p. 27). This unique technique has been used or written about in two of Mikhail's volumes: *The Iraqi Nights* (2014) and *In Her Feminine Sign* (2019). The Sumerians, in the past, wrote the history of Iraq on clay tablets. Likewise, Mikhail wants to date in her Sumerian-like-clay-tablet poetry the wars, catastrophes, Iraqi suffering in general, and her exile and traumatic memories in particular. Mikhail uses in these poems what is called "Al-Sahl Al-Mumtane" in Arabic, a language that delivers information and emotion with great fluidity. Even though these poems contain a few words, they have

an enormous meaning. In these poems, she merges the past of Iraq with its presence in a modern language.

In her Tablet poems, Mikhail uses the technique of Imagism poetry to express themes of trauma, grief, and exile in delicate single pictures and a limited amount of words. Her tablets are short and condensed poems that provide a portrayal of the Iraqi scene. T. E. Hulme (1883-1917), an English poet, used the term "imagism poetry" to describe his philosophical views on poetry. The Poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972) coined the term as a literary trend and put it into the poetic lexicon. When he released the Complete Poetical Works of Hulme in 1915, Pound was the first to adopt the term 'Imagist'. Imagism poetry, written in free verse, illustrates the functional role of the visual image in the poem, as seen by the poem's brevity and clarity of language. Its concentration on the specific image is rooted in Japanese Haiku poetry, which moved away from the conventions of technical and metrical reflections to focus on the image as a mental and emotional complex in a single moment (Beach, 2003, p. 26).

Pound's significant influence on English modernist poetry is in his Haiku-like poems, which capture a single picture using a model of word compression in verse. He discovered that the image-focused approach of haiku poetry could more effectively achieve the transformative objectives that the avant-garde poets, including Pound, aspired to in modern poetry. It became necessary to adopt a new poetic approach to adequately reflect the rapid changes of the modern world as a result of the massively chaotic and destructive circumstances brought on by World War I as well as technological, intellectual, psychological, and scientific advancements (Beach, 2003, p. 27).

Haiku poetry is a concise lyric style of Japanese poetry that means "play verse" because a haiku poet manipulates language to create a single image that expresses their philosophical reflection on the universe. Haiku poetry "encapsulates a single impression" of an object or a natural scene in three lines of five, seven, and five

syllables each. At the end of the 16th century, haiku poetry reached its zenith. The Japanese poet Matsuo Basho (1644–94) is regarded as the founder and most outstanding representative of Haiku poetry, also known as Hokku (Baldick, 1996, pp. 148–149). Accordingly, Pound formed his imagism poems inspired by haiku poetry. However, he paid less attention to the traditional division of syllables and lines of Haiku and focused more on the form's fundamental imagery techniques, word economy, and suggestiveness.

Mikhail uses imagery to depict the idea of war as mass slaughter and the prospect of cultural renewal through human passion and drive. Her Tablets combine with the Haiku format to provide a visual representation of a nation's pain due to political and military conflict. Arwa Hussein Mohammed, Assistant Professor of English literature and literary theory at Tikrit University, writes in her book, *Poetics of Multiculturalism in Postmodernist Arab-American Poetry* (2021), that "In Sumerian-like clay tablets, Mikhail encompasses the history of current Iraq and the collective memory of Iraqis, depicting various images of Iraqi women and men who share war, death, loss, and internal exile as shared nominators" (p.124). These poems, dubbed "Tablets," are Iraqi Haikus, according to Mikhail, who also remarks on how they are accompanied by illustrations of Sumerian-style clay tablets that serve as illustrative visual counterpoints. Each tablet's section is subdivided into twenty-four poems, representing the twenty-four hours of the day. In this view, the division represents the monotony of life in Iraq and the mundane daily struggles that Iraqis face (Mohammed, 2021, p. 125).

After twenty years of exile, Mikhail expresses how strong the bond between her and Iraq is. In "Tablet 19" from her 2014 volume, *The Iraqi Nights*, she says: "far away from home/ that's all changed in us"(p. 31). In this Sumerian-like-clay tablet poem, the speaker-poet expresses her feelings and belongings for her homeland. After a long time of exile, nothing has changed inside the speaker. The speaker is only physically exiled, but spiritually she always exists in her homeland. Her writings and

senses are always associated with her homeland. Her memories and nostalgia for her birthplace never vanished.

Nearly five years after publishing *The Iraqi Nights* (2014) and more than twenty years of exile, Mikhail proves that her exile is physical, not spiritual. In "Tablet III", specifically sections 1 and 4 of her volume *In Her Feminine sign* (2019), she expresses a strong connection to her homeland. In section 1, she likens herself to a turtle:

"Like the turtle,  
I walk everywhere  
with my home on my back" (p. 36).

Mikhail likens herself to a turtle because it always carries its home on its back wherever it goes. Mikhail is like a turtle; she carries the memories of thirty years on her back. Her sense of belonging always accompanies her.

The memories and sense of belonging could be a kind of burden. "It is a burden because it is a kind of responsibility to my homeland", she says (Abu-Zaindean, 2021, 18:40). Mikhail considers her senses and belongings a responsibility more than nostalgia. In section 4, she envies the ants for not looking back:

"Oh, little ants,  
how you move forward  
without looking back  
If I could only borrow your steps" (p. 36).

Unlike ants, Mikhail always looks back to her home. It is her responsibility as a writer to look back and reveal her homeland's sufferings. No matter what you get and see in a host country, there will be a missing thing inside that will force you to look back.

In "tablet 23" of *the Iraqi Night* (2014), the poet uses the plural pronoun (we) to express the exodus of Iraqis as a result of tyrant rulers, wars, and political turmoil. Furthermore, the poet uses present simple to portray a realistic image and narrate the sufferings of the exiles.

"We cross borders lightly  
like clouds.  
Nothing carries us,  
but as we move on  
we carry rain,  
and an accent,  
and a memory  
of another place"(p. 22, ll. 1-8).

Trauma is an overwhelming incident that cannot be processed generally at the time of occurrence, and thus its memory is effectively suppressed, but it returns to torment the victim and haunt him (Kurtz, 2018, p. 3). At the time of exile, it is hard for immigrants to realize the event, but with time, the traumatic memories start to haunt and affect their lives. In these lines, the poet likens the immigrants to hollow clouds that carry nothing but darkness. She compares the immigrants to "clouds" to show how they leave: empty-handed. The rain associated with clouds reminds us of "tears" that would come from the eyes of those who are forced to leave their homes. In exile, those empty and dark clouds (immigrants) will rain with tears of home longing, nostalgia for a birth language, and memories of their origin.

When you lose your homeland, you have lost the essence of your soul, which you can never retrieve. A person who loses the essence of his soul will not be afraid of losing anything else because he has lost everything that matters. In his book *Reflections on Exile* (2013), Said states that "Exile is essential sadness that can never be surmounted" (p.173). The exiled person is like an unstitched wound that is

continuing to bleed. Even if that wound coalesces with time, it will leave a scar forever. In "Tablet 17", section IV of *In Her Feminine Sign* (2019), the poet expresses how vital the homeland is to the exiled people.

"The homeless are not afraid  
to miss something  
The world passes before their eyes  
as clouds pass over rushing cars  
pigeons miss some of the seeds  
on the road and step away.  
Yet only the homeless know  
what it means to have a home  
and to return to it" (p. 44, ll. 1-9).

Home is one of our psychic vocabulary's most emotionally contentious and evocative concepts (Rubenstein, 2001, p. 1). It is an essential thing in the lives of people. When people lose their homes, they will live soulless lives like ghosts. The poet uses the image of the clouds again in this tablet. In "tablet 23" of *the Iraqi Night* (2014), she likens the exiles to clouds. In this tablet, the poet resembles the world to clouds and the exiles to rushing cars. People in a rushing car will not pay attention to or care about clouds because they are unimportant. As she likens the exiles to empty clouds, now the world is worthless for exiles after losing their home. The clouds in the two sections refer literarily and figuratively to the irony of the lightness of things in a heavy situation (Personal contact via Gmail app, April 5, 2022).

Mikhail believes poetry is "an ex-ray", not a medicine to cure wounds. It helps to see and understand the wound (Montagne, 2013, para. 10). In "Tablet 12" of *In Her Feminine Sign* (2019), she narrates how Iraqis have been forced to leave their homeland at various times and generations. "I included my story of leaving my country with their stories because that was, to me, like holding hands with those

exiles", she states (Aou-zeinddine, 2021, 18:00). Mikhail feels responsible for consoling those exiles by mixing her pain with theirs.

"The grandfather left the country  
with only one suitcase.

The father left with empty hands.

The son left with no hands" (p. 37).

Due to her earlier work as a journalist, Mikhail ligates between journalism and poetry in many of her works. The above lines are just like reporting events. She narrates them interestingly and poetically. When she left Iraq, she felt it was unjust and unfair to leave her home after thirty years with only one suitcase. Now she feels lucky because the people after her were not allowed to take any suitcases with them. Isis and gangs give them 24 hours to leave their homes. These people might be even luckier than those who will come after them. The men and women who came after those people were taken captive and treated as prisoners. Women were raped and sold in a market known as the "Sabaya Market". Children were abused, and men were murdered and buried in mass graves (Aou-zeinddine, 2021, 25:20-28:00). Mikhail dates the Iraqis' exile and their traumatic memories in the same way that the Sumerians dated Iraq's history on their clay tablets. She reveals the wounds of her homeland and thus become inscribed in memory.

## Conclusion

Traumatic memories, displacement trauma, seeking home, and nostalgia are the wreckage of diaspora, and they all affect the formation of the hyphenated identity of diasporic individuals. Diaspora and its debris affect immigrants spiritually, and they haunt the first generations of immigrants throughout their traumatic memories and diasporic experiences.



The current study demonstrated that trauma, home, and nostalgia are associated with psychic meanings rather than physical ones. Diasporic people feel nostalgia for the home's spiritual value, not its physical locale. Home as a location has no intrinsic value in itself; it is related to emotions and a sense of belonging. According to the first generations of immigrants, the spiritual value of the home is meaningful and directed due to the factual memories and experiences they lived through.

The hyphen, which is annexed to the diasporic individual's identity, indicates a conflict between the past, which represents the homeland, and the present, which represents the host country. Each eye is drawn to a separate side of the hyphen that connects the two terms of the cultural inscription. There appear to be two distinct identities attempting to coexist within the same person.

Through discussing the effects of war trauma, political turmoil, and diasporic experiences on Mikhail's life, it is clear that she is still suffering from her traumatic experiences and her psychic wounds are still unhealed despite her long years of exile. As a first-generation immigrant, Mikhail is affected by her traumatic memories before her diaspora. Her diasporic experiences and forced exile play a significant role in forming her exilic identity. She is struggling between here and there. She does not feel at home in the host land, and the home where she belongs cannot be reached. Everything in the host country reminds her of her homeland. It is a reflection of the memories that haunted her. Therefore, life in exile carries a duality of being, language, and memory. She is only physically exiled, but spiritually, she always exists in her homeland.

In her tablet poems, Mikhail employs folklore to merge the past of Iraq with its presence in a modern language. Just as the Sumerians, in the past, wrote the history of Iraq on clay tablets, Mikhail wanted to date in her Sumerian-like-clay tablet poetry the wars, catastrophes, and Iraqi suffering in general and her exile and traumatic

memories in particular. She reveals the wounds of her homeland and thus become inscribed in memory. Besides, the use of the tablet poems emphasizes her solid senses and belonging to her homeland despite the long years of exile.

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