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Displacement, Belonging and Identity in Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore how home – as a concept and a physical space—is depicted in Arab American Susan Muaddi Darraj's novel *The Inheritance of Exile* (2007). I argue that the novel, set in the American city of Philadelphia, depicts the concept home as a site of contesting and conflicting ideas as issues of race, ethnicity, gender, class and generational differences among other dynamics intersect with attempts by different characters to define and re-define home. At the same time, the physical space of home becomes a site where these ideas are expressed and heatedly debated. As the characters unfold their stories, home becomes a character in the space of their narratives. By depicting various episodes from the lives of immigrant Palestinian women and their American (ized) daughters, the concept of home emerges as complex, multilayered and elusive. As characters trade homes, move into new neighborhoods and think they have left behind a legacy of exile, displacement, marginalization and exclusion still tint their daily experiences. For instance, Hanan, the daughter of a second generation Arab American man and an immigrant Palestinian woman, discovers the futility of her incessant attempts to assert her Americanness by staking a claim on the city in which she was born and raised up. Although she marries an American man of Irish descent and lives with him in a town house which she prefers to her parents' row house, people around her, including her in-laws, insist on calling her "ethnic". In short, Hanan realizes that exile is an inevitable and inescapable fate as Edward Said reminds us in his essay

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“Reflections on Exile”. True to the title of the novel, the narratives the characters recount affirm that home is an oxymoron that encapsulates experiences and memories of rootedness, dispersal, fulfillment and anguish.

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Keywords

Arab American; Exile; Home; Palestinian diaspora; Susan Muaddi Darraj

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