



When Tablets Speak: Examining Diasporic Identity in Dunya Mikhail's Poetry

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Abstract

The study aims to demonstrate that diasporic people feel nostalgia for the spiritual value of their homes, not for their physical location. The diaspora theory is applied to frame the analysis of Dunya Mikhail's selected poems. They represent how diasporic identity is intrinsically linked to the recollection of one's native culture from positive and negative perspectives. This paper argues that diaspora and traumatic memories of the past impact the formation of the exilic identity, and there is a considerable link between the two. It deals with weighty themes, including migration, homelessness, loss, and nostalgia. It examines the poetry of the Iraqi-American poet Dunya Mikhail (1965–), who has innovated a new poetic genre known as 'tablets poems'. Furthermore, it exemplifies how diasporic experiences and painful memories may influence the formation of an immigrant's identity upon arrival. It contends that historical events will always loom large in the minds of immigrants and will always impact their present-day lives.

Keywords: Diaspora, displacement trauma, nostalgia, home, Tablet poems

Introduction

The concept of 'diaspora' has gained international prominence in recent years, and its effects may be felt all across the world. The Jewish diaspora and national boundaries no

longer define it. Its effects on people's daily lives are greater. Colonization, conflict, political turmoil, despotic regimes, economic considerations, and poverty are all contributing causes. Colonialism and the age that followed it, known as post colonialism, are the primary causes of diaspora. It's a bad consequence of post-colonialism. The process of diaspora itself has several consequences and products for those left behind. Trauma from relocation, recollections of past trauma, homesickness, and nostalgia are all results 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, 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 (2013, 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 argues that the term 'diaspora' is derived from the Jewish word "galut"; he believes that this term evokes oppression, discrimination, and legal constraints (2005, p. 36).

The concept of 'diaspora' has evolved 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 states, 'diaspora' is a group of individuals living beyond their motherland (1986, 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.

The current 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.

Diaspora: A Critical survey

According to Imran Majeed Bhat, 'Diaspora' is not a new phenomenon in the globe or people's lives. It has existed since the dawn of time (2015, 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 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" (2013, 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).

Stuart Hall's concept of "diaspora consciousness" highlights the dual perspectives of the diasporic subject, who simultaneously views the world from the perspective of the homeland and the host society. Hall argues that "diaspora consciousness involves a sense of 'double-vision,' where the diasporic subject simultaneously views the world from the perspective of the homeland and the host society" (Hall, 1990, p. 211). Mikhail's poems often oscillate between Iraqi and American perspectives, reflecting the dual consciousness of diasporic writers. For example, her critique of global indifference to the suffering in Iraq demonstrates this "double-vision." Hall also notes that diaspora is "a site of negotiation between continuity and change, tradition and modernity" (Hall, 1990, p. 212). Mikhail's preservation of Iraqi cultural symbols while addressing contemporary issues like war and displacement illustrates this negotiation.

Paul Gilroy's concept of the "Black Atlantic" emphasizes the hybridity of diasporic cultures, where identities are shaped through dialogue and exchange between different cultural traditions. Gilroy argues that "the diasporic condition is one of hybridity, where cultures are constantly in dialogue and exchange, creating new forms of identity" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 7). Mikhail's poetry exemplifies this hybridity through her use of surreal imagery,

multilingualism (Arabic and English), and her blending of Iraqi cultural symbols with her experiences in the United States. For instance, in *The Beekeeper: Rescuing the Stolen Generations*, Mikhail's poetic voice merges personal narratives with broader cultural and political themes, reflecting the hybrid nature of diasporic identity. Gilroy also suggests that diaspora "is not just about loss and exile but also about the creation of new possibilities and identities" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 11). Mikhail's reinvention of traditional Iraqi folklore in her poetry demonstrates how diaspora allows for the reimagining of cultural narratives, creating new possibilities for expression and identity.

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).

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).

The 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).

Dunya Mikhail: 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 poet. 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. Her work portrays the Iraqi experience through thirty years of war and even the present wars surrounding Iraq and its people. Mikhail's poetry addresses the Iraqi people's suffering as a result of wars, sanctions, repression, and genocide (Simawe & Weissbort, 2003, p. 270).

Tablet Poems in Mikhail's *The Iraqi Nights* and *In Her Feminine Sign*

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-Sahh 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.

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 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 (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 haunts 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 literally 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 (Abou-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 (Abouzeinddine, 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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