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Nostalgia, Home and Palestine: Tracing the Diasporic Elements in the Works of Hala Alyan

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ABSTRACT

In the present era of globalization people are continuously on the move from one geographical location to another. This move turns into migration when they settle at a place other than their home and during their permanent settlement at a new location, other than their own country, they maintain a connection with the people of their community over there to remember and preserve the culture, heritage and ethnicity create diaspora. If the diaspora is voluntary, people try to assimilate the new culture and sometimes create a hybrid culture by mixing the ethnic culture with the culture of the host nation. But if it is forced diaspora then initially the diasporic population tries to resist the change and long to return to their homeland. Hala Alyan is a Palestinian American author. Her novels and poems provide moving references to the Palestinian diaspora which comprises, the Palestinian exodus caused by the declaration of the independent state of Israel in 1948, followed by the Seven Days War of 1967, with ample light on the life of refugees in camps and other hardships and psychological traumas caused by displacement.

Keywords: Palestine, diaspora, migration, displacement, transnationalism.

Introduction: The term diaspora refers to a community of individuals who have moved away, from their home or ancestral homeland. The term was initially used to describe the dispersion of Jews from their homeland but now it encompasses a broader range of individuals such as immigrants, refugees, exiles and expatriates. At its core, diaspora theory is about the complicated relationship between the homeland and the new host land. It sheds light on how people and communities maintain ties to their origins while adapting to new settings. The word diaspora has been taken from the Greek verb "*speiro*," which means "to sow", and "*dia*," meaning "over" (Smith, 2004). In the words of Robert Cohen, a diaspora community can be defined as:

> Members of a defined group have been dispersed to many destinations; they construct a shared identity; they still somewhat orient themselves to an original 'home'; and they demonstrate an affinity with other members of the group dispersed to other places." (Smith, 2004, p. 1)

Diaspora theory also poses important questions about cultural identity and hybridity. It looks at how people blend and negotiate different cultural traditions. A key part of diaspora is transnationalism which studies how diaspora groups stay connected to and exchange with their homelands even after leaving it. These concepts challenge old notions of firm national borders and reflect the complex, multi-layered identities in diasporas. The diaspora theory provides a broad framework that helps to study the intricacies and challenges of the diasporic communities scattered globally. Diasporic writings have emerged as a genre of literature that explores the experiences of displacement, homelessness, detachment and the search for refuge. These narratives delve into the hardships faced by immigrants, including rootlessness, struggles with identity, feelings of loss and nostalgia. The diasporic writings depict both the sorrows and joys along with the hopes and vulnerabilities experienced by those living in the diaspora.

Scholars categorize diaspora into two main types- forced diaspora and voluntary diaspora. Forced diaspora often arises from disastrous events such as warfare, imperialistic invasions, slavery, or natural disasters like prolonged famine or drought. The people in a forced diaspora often suffer from feelings of oppression, grief, and a longing for their homeland and the people of Palestine are a good example of forced Diaspora. Oppositely, a voluntary diaspora comprises individuals who have departed their homelands willingly, in search of economic prospects, educational opportunities and other reasons. As it has been stated in, *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*, "Diasporas, the voluntary or forcible movements of peoples from their homelands into new regions…" (Ashcroft et al. 1998, p. 68-69).

According to Safran, a few key factors define a diaspora community. First, the diasporic people have spread out from their original homeland to at least two new regions. Second, they collectively remember their homeland and feel connected to their homeland. Third, they feel that they will always be treated as outsiders and not be accepted in the host nation because of their background. Fourth, they romanticize and idealize their ancestral homeland and wish to return there. Fifth, they hold a belief that, they should share a collective commitment for the preservation of their native land and to ensure its security and wellbeing. Sixth, they maintain a direct or indirect connection and sense of belonging, with their homeland (Safran, 1991). But Clifford disagrees with some of Safran's ideas, especially when it comes to Jewish diaspora groups. He doesn't think they fit the last three criteria that Safran has mentioned. Clifford believes diaspora communities are defined more by their relation to borders and identities. They exist in contrast to the strong national identities and territories claimed by countries and indigenous peoples (Clifford, 1994).

Rogers Brubaker's article "The 'diaspora' diaspora" mentions that dispersion in space, orientation to a homeland and boundary-maintenance, are the main elements of diaspora. Sudesh Mishra in *Diaspora Criticism,* coins three pillars of diaspora which are transnationalism, globalization, and modernity. Gabriel Sheffer in *Diaspora Politics at Home Abroad* focuses on the relationship of the diasporic community, homeland and host land. Sheffer applies the term ethno-national diasporas to the people, permanently living outside their homes. He defines ethno-national diaspora as:

> An ethno-national diaspora is a social-political formation, created as a result of either voluntary or forced migration, whose members regard themselves as of the same ethno-national origin and who permanently reside as minorities in one or several host countries. Members of such entities maintain regular or occasional contacts with what they regard as their homelands and with individuals and groups of the same background residing in other host countries. (Brubaker, 2005, p. 9-10)

Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* uses a new term named homing desire. Home for her, "is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin (188)." She does not agree with other diaspora critics that immigrants necessarily want to return to their homeland. She argues that members of diaspora communities may eventually lose their desire to return, as they build new lives and communities in their new homelands. Thomas Faist studies the modern concept of transnationalism and differentiates between diaspora and transnationalism in his book *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods:*

> Although both terms refer to cross-border processes, diaspora has been often used to denote religious or national groups living outside an (imagined) homeland, whereas transnationalism is often used both more narrowly – to refer to migrants' durable ties across countries – and, more widely, to capture not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organisations. (Brah, 1996, p. 9)

Robin Cohen in *Global Diasporas an Introduction* classifies Diaspora in six categories named as- victim diaspora, labour diaspora, imperial diaspora, trade diaspora, deterritorialized diaspora and incipient diaspora and puts the Palestinian diaspora under victim diaspora. Cohen mentions that the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, resulted in the displacement of 726,000 Palestinians to camps and neighboring countries, which was a catastrophe for the Palestinian people, known as the Nakba. He terms the Palestinian diaspora as victim diaspora. He further quotes the words of Mahmoud Darwish as:

> The makers of the Nakba, of the catastrophe, failed to break the will of the Palestinian people and to eradicate their national identity, through diasporization, through massacre, through pretending that the mirage was a reality, through the production of a counterfeit history. (Cohen, 2022, p. 12)

Hala Alyan is a Palestinian American author; her novels and poetry are full of the experiences of

the Palestinian Diaspora. She was born in Carbondale, Illinois in the United States. She spent her formative years in various places including Kuwait, Oklahoma, Texas, Maine, and Lebanon. All the displacement and uprootedness of her life have been reflected in her works. Alyan has authored four poetry collections, entitled *Atrium* (2012), *Four Cities* (2015), *Hijra* (2016), and *The Twenty-Ninth Year* (2019). In addition to her poetic works, she has written two novels named *Salt Houses* (2017) and *The Arsonist's City* (2021). Her works depict the diasporic trauma, search for a home, the quest for identity and the memories of Palestine. Being a second generation of the diasporic community, she has not faced the direct migration from Palestine but her connection with Palestine and the narratives of its collective memory by her ancestors have influenced her a lot. She has so beautifully woven the concept of Palestinian diaspora in the family saga of her novels. Being a clinical Psychologist, she has perfectly portrayed the psychological state of the diasporic community in her narrative poems.

Hala Alyan's Novel *Salt Houses* depicts the multiple migration of the family of Salma from Jaffa to Nablus then from there to Kuwait and after this the settling of her grandchildren in Amman, America and other parts of the world. Salama and Nasar settled in Nablus along with their children Widad, Mustafa and Alia in 1948. It was not easy for Salma and Hassan to leave their home and farms in Nablus. The migration turned Hussen into a living dead. As three of the children missed their happy father of Jaffa because in Nablus he was a transformed being. Salma too tried hard to recreate the gardens in Nablus and got succeeded too in it. Salma could never forget her home in Palestine and even on her death bed she remembers it:

> You must remember…. When it happens, you must find a way to remember…. I was wrong. I thought I could make myself see something that wasn't there. But it was a lie. I saw the houses, I saw how they were lost. *You cannot let yourself forget.* (Alyan, 2017, p. 141)

Due to the war in 1967, they were again uprooted from Nablus. Mustafa dies in the strife and Alia and her husband Atef have to move to Kuwait where her elder sister Widad is married. Although Alia lives in Kuwait, she misses Nablus and wants to settle in Amman where the rest of the people of her community have migrated to. But her husband Atef doesn't want to move to Amman because he is running from the sad memories of war and he thinks that the familiar people and relatives will keep on reminding him about the lost land and lost people. Alia and Atef have their own ways of dealing with the pain of lost land and ethnicity. Atef seeks an escape in Kuwait whereas, Alia longs for the connection with the people of her community with whom she can share her cultural background and the trauma of displacement. As Alia thinks:

> Instead of staying in Kuwait's wasteland, the endless afternoons of television and heat, let them go to Amman, the coffee shops and vendors hawking fruit, neighborhoods filled with old friends. Yes, everyone was distraught, mourning the houses and cities they'd left behind, the men beneath the soil. Shouldn't they mourn together? Palestine has vanished for them—this knowledge crept up on Alia slowly, a new death every morning: Mustafa gone, Nablus gone—but they can find the ashes in Amman, collect them to build another life. (Alyan, 2017, p. 59-60)

Alia faces the same battle of displacement and migration that was faced by her parents. Initially, she hates being in Kuwait and argues with her husband for sending the children to the English medium schools in Kuwait. As she says, "So they can share their lunch with *ajnaib?...* and learn their ABCs? What for (84)?" But she had to surrender as it was the best school. Three of the children of Alia and Atef were born and brought up in Kuwait. But the family's stay in Kuwait is not permanent after so many years when one of Alia's daughters is married and her younger children are studying abroad, once again the situation compels them to migrate. Her mother used to miss Jaffa, she missed Nablus and now her youngest daughter Souad misses her home in Kuwait. For the children, their birthplace, where they have grown up is their home, not the place of their parents' origin. Souad feels the pangs of diasporic pain when she realizes that she won't be able to visit her home anymore:

> Their house rushed through Souad's mind. The rooms, the photographs on the walls, the sunlight through veranda windows. Her own bedroom, suddenly empty— she knows the room as she knows her own body, and she couldn't conjure a single image of it. (Alyan, 2017, p. 162)

The children of Alia and Atef settle in various corners of the world. Riham settles in Amman. Souad marries in France and later settles in America. Karam too gets settled in America. Both Karam and Riham buy flats in Beirut and three of the siblings visit the place during the summer vacations. Alia can't bear the fact that the children of Souad and Karam can't speak and understand Arabic. She wants her grandchildren to stay connected with their roots and for their inability to connect with Arabic, she blames Karam and Souad, "You've

raised the children as Americans. They barely understand what their grandmother is saying to them (242).” But then the children who have been born and brought up in America feel themselves alien in the Beirut Apartments as for them America is their birthplace and home. Their parents want to stay in touch with their roots and visit their own parents. But the children are at a loss to find any logic behind the visits. As Karam’s daughter Linah feels out of place in Beirut and wants to return to her home. For Linah her home is America. Linah says:

> Why do the adults like this city? If it were up to her, she’d never come back. She would go to summer camp with Susan in the Berkshires, where the girls stay up late telling scary stories and make friendship bracelets. There’s horseback riding and theater and water skiing; Linah stole one of the brochures from Susan’s house last summer and read every page. (Alyan, 2017, p. 244)

The trauma of war, displacement and separation influence all the characters of the novel in different ways. Atef becomes a changed person and keeps on writing letters to his dead friend Mustafa to come out of the trauma. Alia suffers from Alzheimer's and lives in the memories of Nablus. Riham embraces the religious faith of her grandmother Salma, she marries a married doctor and raises his only child. Karam marries a woman of another cast and country and faces the annoyance of her mother. Souad, can’t forget about her divorced husband and her depressive phase makes her children suffer. But, at the end of the novel Souad’s daughter Manar, pays a visit to Palestine and traces the places, she has heard about from her grandparents.

The Arsonists’ City tells the story of Damascus-born Mazna, Beirut-born heart surgeon Idris and his friend Zakaria who is a Palestinian refugee. Mazna aspires to become an actress, Idris visits Damascus and falls in love with her, but when Mazna visits Beirut she falls in love with Zakaria. Zakaria lives in camps and her mother hates the place, she is nostalgic about Palestine and she preserves even the small objects brought from Palestine as relics. The names of the towns and villages of Palestine have become a part of their life and are repeated in day-to-day conversation. As she scolds her children for spoiling the mat which was brought by her mother from Jerusalem:

> You think my mama, Allah rest her soul, Allah take her and Allah keep her, hauled this on her back, her back, all the way from Jerusalem to Ramallah to Amman to this godforsaken armpit of the world so that her heathen grandchildren could spill soda on it? His mother hates the camps, hates Beirut, all of Lebanon, hates their neighbors, the aunties with their tattling and boring lives, always reminding her children, we used to have gardens in Palestine, trees that belonged to us. (Alyan, 2021, p. Viii)

The novel throws ample light on the racial discrimination and torture of migrants in foreign countries. The hate of the people of Beirut for Palestinians can be found in several incidents like when a soldier enters a bakery where Zakaria works and threatens the owner of the bakery for hiring a Palestinian, later in the conversation of Idris’s friend who blames that the nation should never open its gates for migrants when it doesn’t have ample resources. Zakaria becomes a victim of racial discrimination and enmities and some people kill him. As Mazna contemplates the reason for Zakaria’s death, “The men didn’t go after Zakaria just because of the checkpoint, the dead boy. A Palestinian life is worth less than a Lebanese one. Even she knows that (211).” Many years after the death of Zakaria, when Mazna herself becomes a migrant in America, she remembers his words and the hardships faced by the Palestinians:

> He’d told her that his family was from Jaffa, that sometimes his mother whispered the name. If she forgot it, she would die… He was Palestinian and lived in this camp. A refugee camp in Lebanon. He told me that if you forget the name of your land, that’s when it’s really lost. (Alyan, 2021, p. 334)

Mazna migrates to America with her husband Idris and tries to adjust to the foreign lifestyle and culture. Mazna faces challenges in her day-to-day life. Initially, she is alien to the culture of America and even shopping and commuting to market becomes a difficult task. She loses her confidence and finds it difficult to communicate with the bus conductors, as she contemplates,” In school, she was one of the best in English class, but hers is an English of movies and theater, not everyday conversation (311).” She feels out of place in America and just wants to return to her home but at the same time she finds out about her pregnancy which was a result of her one-time lovemaking with Zakaria. Mazna comes to know about her pregnancy in America, after her marriage with Idris and now she cannot return. She tries hard to adjust and starts looking for a job. Since her arrival in America, even after the birth of her first two children, she made futile attempts to continue her acting career, but her Arab origin can’t let her enter Hollywood. She feels discriminated against and accepts the work of gardening in a greenhouse. Mazna, the revered actress of Syria is bound to do menial labour in the greenhouse. But she never felt herself as

an American, which can be traced from their conversation when Idris started earning well and he tried to persuade Mazna from work:

> *Mazna, we're not immigrant students anymore. I make a good salary. We live in a good house. You don't have to work there*. He'd gone on like that for years until Mazna finally replied, *I was never a student here. I will always be an immigrant.* (Alyan, 2021, p. 66)

Idris and Mazna were migrants to America and their children Ava, Mimi and Naz were born and brought up in America and live transnational life by settling in different corners of the world. Although Mazna herself was compelled to live far from her homeland and cultural background but she tried her best to keep her children stay connected with their roots. Sometimes she used to work hard to cook the traditional dishes the way the grandmother of her children used to cook but the dislike of her children for Arabic food used to disturb and infuriate her. She dislikes Ava's marriage with Nate, who has origin in England and Mimi's Kurdish girlfriend Budur. Later on, the fact pains her that her grandchildren can't speak Arabic. She comments on this so often that even her daughter Ava feels guilty for the same:

> Zina rattles on in English about beaches and toy stores. Ava feels a ping of guilt.
>
> When she and Nate take the children to visit her parents in California, Mazna insists on speaking to them in Arabic and harasses Ava for being a "fake Arab."
>
> It's one thing, Ava's mother has said many times, to marry an *ajnabi,* live in an *ajnabi* city. But to deprive your children of their heritage? It's a tragedy.
>
> (Alyan, 2021, p. 22)

The novel depicts reverse migration too by the character of Naz, as she starts her musical career in Beirut and feels as if the whole of Beirut is her kith and kin. She organizes her shows all around the world but decides to live in Beirut. Later on, when her father Idris decides to sell the Beirut home, she opposes his decision. The Arsonists' City presents a unique idea that the homeland and the old tradition of joint family have the power to resolve all the conflicts. Mazna had been running from her past throughout her life but after coming to Beirut, she confronts Zakaria's mother and resolves her conflicts with Sara. Idris realizes that he can't sell the old house. Mimi reconsiders his passion for cooking and realizes that he will open a restaurant where he will cook authentic Arab dishes. Naz accepts her lesbian identity and plans to share it with her family, Ava comes to know about her dead father and decides to stay in Beirut for some time.

Hala Alyan's first book of poetry, *Atrium*, was published in 2012 and marked the beginning of her literary career. She began writing poetry as a way to understand the world around her and found comfort in the power of language to convey complex emotions. She has written poems on diverse themes in this book. The collection explores themes of love, loss, and longing, using vivid imagery and striking metaphors to evoke deep emotions. *Atrium* was critically acclaimed and established Alyan as a poet. She has divided the book into two parts and written fifty-six poems in it. The diasporic cry can be found in her poem entitled "Teta" in which she writes:

> One grandmother styles the sky,
> One grandmother smothers it.
> …
> One grandmother coppers her hair.
> One grandmother remembers Syria. (Alyan, 2012, p. 33)

"Teta" is an Arabic word for grandmother, the poem presents a contrast between two women. One woman belongs to a peaceful nation while the other is Palestinian. She compares that one grandmother is enjoying music while the other has to die breastless, being the victim of violence following the war. She hints that even the children of the immigrants are so influenced by the trauma faced by their parents that they can't adjust with their respective partners when Alyan writes that one grandmother is enjoying the fragrance of Basil while the other is a mother of a divorcee. One grandmother is shown immersed in maintaining her physical beauty by applying colour to her hair while the other is remembering her home and past life spent in Syria.

Hala Alyan's poetry collection *Four Cities* portrays themes of love, war, family, and nationality through her own perspective as a Palestinian-American immigrant. The poetry collection has been divided into two parts which comprise fifty-seven poems. Her poems share the memories of the land and cities she has lived in. Her poems are full of realistic imagery and sensory details of the geographical places of Palestine. Alyan's poems in *Four Cities* wander from Detroit to Haifa, Tripoli to Brooklyn, and vividly portray the complex and often contradictory experiences of immigrants, who are constantly vacillating between different cultures and identities.

She also writes about the impact of war and occupation on individuals and communities. She mentions the names of specific cities of the Arab world, as she writes in a poem entitled Push, "*Gaza.* I'm sorry. *Beirut*. I still love you like an arsonist… *Ramallah.* Thank you for the applause" (10). Similar diasporic feelings can be sensed in the poem with the title "Meimei," with the words:

Before my mother, there was
another daughter. Jaffa.
So tiny, my grandmother says, lived
For only thirty-three days. That was in
The desert, she says, before it crumbled
Apart, before they lost that home, and
The one after that, and the one
After that. (Alyan, 2015, p. 41)

Alyan describes the trauma of displacement and continuous migration under the guise of a family history. As she writes in the above-sited poem in the narrator's family, her grandmother had another daughter who died before the trauma of leaving Palestine. The love for the old home situated in the desert and the pain of leaving home have been aptly woven into the web of this poem. The trouble did not end only with migration, the people had to move again in search of home as suggested in the last line of the stanza. The grandmother of the speaker in the above-said poem asks the speaker to return to her home and dissuades her from falling in love with America.

The third collection of Hala Alyan's poetry entitled *Hijra* takes its name from the Arabic "hijra," which means migration, people also associate this word with Prophet Muhammad's sacred journey from Mecca to Medina. Hala Alyan employs this concept of spiritually significant travel to narrate the experiences of people, who share a connection to the Middle East, particularly Gaza and Syria, and who are compelled to leave their homes due to political reasons. The book has been divided into four parts and it contains fifty-one poems. This poetry collection is more subjective in comparison to her other books of poetry. The second section of the collection encompasses fifteen poems, each bearing the name of an Arabic woman. These names may or may not correspond to real individuals in the poet's life but the Palestinians can surely associate themselves with these characters. There exists a voice of collective memory, diaspora and exile in this collection. As in the poem, "The Letter Home," Alyan writes:

Tell her
You miss your city like a lung. You miss the crakes, the fickle sea
Washing along the drift wood, the way even the locusts bring music, tell
Her you wake at dawn weeping for figs, and when she writes back
She will call you a fool, she will say sister, they've turned this
Land into grave. (Alyan, 2016, p. 44)

The narrator is writing a letter to her home, it signifies that she doesn't feel at home at the place she has migrated to. The old home, the sea and the woods each and everything has been missed by the narrator. Even the small food items and other things associated with the home are being missed. In return, the narrator has been called a fool because the thing she has been missing don't exist anymore. The memories of her home have been destroyed and the place has become a graveyard of the memories of Palestine. Because after the occupation by Israel, the old cities have changed. The speaker won't ever be able to find the place in the way she has left it.

Hala Alyan's fourth poetry collection *The Twenty-Ninth Year* depicts the life incidents of an immigrant who gives references to life and culture of various places, including Beirut, Texas, Iraq, Oklahoma and America. The poems explore the themes of truth, cross-cultural lives, anorexia, alcoholism, and sex. The poems reveal hard truths of adjustment in a foreign land like the dilemma of choosing between cultural ethics and modernity. It seems as if the poetess is also presenting the dilemmas faced by herself at the age of twenty-nine years. There are total fifty-four poems in this collection which are further divided into six parts, whereas the first and last part contains one poem each. The poems are subjective and of a confessional nature. The given stanza from the poem, "Aleppo," describes the acceptance of diasporic life along with the haunting memories of ethnicity and religious celebrations at the homeland:

The Syria in my grandmother is a decade too old. When she dies,
she will take it with her.
This is how a lone bomb can erase a lineage: the nicknames for your

mother, the ghost stories, the only song that put your child to sleep.
No one is evacuating me.
Your citadel fed to the birds. Your mosque. Someone will make an
art project out of your tweets.
My daughter.
The prophet's birthday arrives without a single firework.
Surrender. Or die. (Alyan, 2019, p. 75)

Alyan talks about Syria, which lives in the memories of the narrator's grandmother. She might have left Syria ten years ago that's why the poetess call it ten years old. Because in the next ten years after the migration of people from there, it might have taken a new shape and old houses and lands might have been occupied by others. Alyan depicts the pain of growing detachment from the roots with the passing of years, she is familiar with the fact that with the death of the narrator's grandmother, the memories of her motherland, will also die. The violence caused by the people is also hinted at as Alyan writes that a single bomb has erased the whole lineage of the families. In the new country, the old religious rites and cultures have lost their meaning and she grieves that the festival of their prophet's birthday will pass without any grand celebration. Finally, she accepts the hard truth that either the migrants will have to stop their resistance to change by adjusting in the new culture and environment or they will have to die.

Conclusion: The close reading of Hala Alyan's novels and poetry explores the abundance of diaspora and remembrance of the old home, culture, ethnicity and lifestyle. Her first novel *Salt Houses* portrays the multiple displacement of the people who originated from Palestine and it's found that up to their last breath, they miss their homeland and the visit of Manar to Jaffa symbolically fulfills the desire of return; in this way, the proceedings of the novel fits Safran's definition of diaspora. *The Arsonists' City* seems an example of migration and transnational movement of the family of Mazna and Idris when it is analysed from the lens of diaspora but the life and condition of Palestinian refugee Zakaria and his family's pathetic condition in camps is a perfect example of the Palestinian diaspora. The poems of Hala Alyan depict the pangs of diaspora faced in day-to-day life. She has portrayed the feelings of layman and their routine where they are unable to forget their lost land and the life lived over that place. Alyan has portrayed the trauma caused by migration and the hardships of adjustment in the new territory followed by identity crisis and rootlessness. The migration portrayed in her novels and poems is the forced migration of Palestinians, which makes it difficult for them to assimilate the culture and lifestyle of the host land.

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