

Mapping Loss, Claiming Self: Spatial Memory and Trauma in Tibetan and Palestinian Memoirs

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Abstract: This paper offers a comparative reading of the deep connection between spatial displacement and the narration of trauma in Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's *A Home in Tibet* (2013) and Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002). Both memoirs show how the rupture of forced exile reshapes an individual's relationship to place and alters the emotional and psychological contours of the self. Instead of treating these works only as political testimonies, this study uses critical spatial theory to explore how each writer negotiates loss, memory, and identity. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's idea of lived space, the paper argues that the imaginative return to the homeland allows the authors to transform absence into a sustaining inner geography that resists political erasure. Doreen Massey's understanding of space as relational helps explain how geopolitical violence becomes embodied and how trauma takes shape within narrative expression. Using Edward Said's reflections on exile and Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, the discussion highlights the emergence of hybrid identities that are formed through constant negotiation between memory and displacement. Ultimately, the paper suggests that the act of mapping remembered landscapes becomes a way of reclaiming narrative agency, creating a personal cartography of the self that helps each writer confront fragmentation and rebuild a sense of belonging. One limitation of this approach is the difficulty of extending individual life-writing accounts to the wider experiences of dispersed diasporic communities.

Key Words: Trauma Narrative, Displacement, Spatial Memory, Diaspora, Postcolonial Theory, Lived Space, Narrative Agency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Forced displacement disrupts geographic rootedness and undermines identity. Investigating how memory and narrative respond to this disruption is essential for understanding life writing influenced by exile. Displacement extends beyond the physical act of crossing borders; it also transforms the inner landscape of the displaced individual. For those uprooted by colonialism, war, or occupation, separation from their homeland manifests as a psychological wound that reverberates across generations. Exile embodies a state of continuous rupture, destabilizing belonging, fracturing inherited memories, and fostering a lingering sense of partial presence, as if one exists between worlds. In such circumstances, memory, particularly spatial memory, becomes vital for reconstructing meaning and reclaiming connections to lost or transformed spaces.

This paper examines the function of spatial memory within the context of forced displacement through a comparative analysis of two memoirs: Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's *A Home in Tibet* (2013) and Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002). Although emerging from distinct geopolitical histories, Tibetan displacement following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959 and Palestinian displacement following the 1948 Nakba, both memoirs illuminate the psychological, emotional, and cultural consequences of losing one's homeland. They demonstrate how the exiled subject constructs a sense of place not through physical proximity but through imaginative, affective, and narrative processes that enable memory to anchor identity.

Dhompa's *A Home in Tibet* situates itself within the Tibetan diaspora's lived experiences, particularly for those born outside Tibet yet shaped by inherited memories. Raised in India and the United States, Dhompas journeys to Tibet following her mother's death. Her memoir transcends mere travel narrative, serving as a meditation on belonging. She writes, "I am returning to a place I have never been," encapsulating the paradox of exilic identity, caught between nostalgia and dislocation. The memoir reconstructs Tibet as an intimate geography shaped by her mother's stories and

silences. Mountains, monasteries, and villages emerge as emotional landmarks rather than static locations. Through narrative, Dhompa transforms Tibet into a lived space that is deeply felt despite the lack of physical habitation. Her descriptions reveal how the exiled body and memory attach themselves to landscapes, seeking recognition from the terrain that shaped prior generations.

Similarly, Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* chronicles her family's forced removal from Qatamon, Jerusalem, during the 1948 conflict. Karmi's narrative reconstructs pre-Nakba Palestine as a space of intimacy, cultural richness, and familiarity. The figure of Fatima, the family's caretaker, becomes a symbolic anchor of security and belonging. Karmi recalls her childhood home not merely as architecture but as an emotional universe whose loss redefined her sense of self. She writes, "We left behind more than walls; we left behind the life that made us who we were." Like Dhompa, Karmi's memoir illustrates that exile represents both spatial and psychological fracture. Her later return to Jerusalem becomes a haunting encounter with loss, as the spaces she once knew have been altered or erased. Through her narrative, Karmi restores the erased geography of Qatamon, insisting on the importance of remembering a place that political forces have sought to overwrite.

Although these memoirs are rooted in distinct historical traumas, they share a thematic concern regarding how place is remembered, reconstructed, and narrated after displacement. Both authors illustrate that exile encompasses more than physical separation; it involves an ongoing negotiation with fragmented memory, inherited grief, and fractured identity. Their works serve as literary mappings of loss, wherein writing becomes an effort to reclaim ownership over narratives that political regimes seek to suppress.

To examine these dynamics, this study employs critical spatial theory as its foundational framework. Henri Lefebvre's concept of lived space is central to this analysis. Lefebvre contends that space is not a neutral physical container but rather a socially constructed entity shaped by experience, attachment, and memory. Lived space reflects how individuals inhabit, interpret, and engage with their environments. In both memoirs, the physical homeland is either inaccessible or irrevocably altered; however, the emotional landscapes remain vivid through memory. The act of returning to the homeland through narrative becomes a means of transforming physical absence into a sustaining inner geography. This geography, constructed through memory, language, and emotion, resists political erasure and preserves cultural continuity.

Incorporating Doreen Massey's understanding of space as relational further enriches the analysis. Massey argues that space is continually shaped by interactions among people, histories, and power structures. Her perspective is essential for understanding how geopolitical violence is embodied within exilic narratives. For both Dhompa and Karmi, trauma is intimately connected to specific spaces such as villages, streets, houses, mountain paths, and neighborhoods remembered with acute sensory detail. Through narrative, these spaces become repositories of loss and resilience. As the authors reconstruct their homelands through memory, they challenge dominant political narratives that seek to negate their histories.

The act of mapping remembered landscapes thus emerges as a powerful strategy for reclaiming narrative agency. Through their memoirs, both writers chart personal cartographies of the self, reconnecting fragmented identities to remembered places. These narrative cartographies contest the structures of colonization and occupation that have sought to silence or distort their histories. By emphasizing the importance of remembering and narrating space, the authors resist the geopolitical erasure of their cultures.

Ultimately, this paper argues that memoirs of displacement, such as *A Home in Tibet* and *In Search of Fatima*, function not merely as repositories of individual memory but as dynamic literary interventions that counter historical silencing. They demonstrate that memory is not solely retrospective; it is a creative force that rebuilds identity and reclaims belonging in the face of loss. Through their narrative reconstructions of place, Dhompa and Karmi transform exile from a state of rupture into an opportunity for self-articulation, cultural preservation, and political resistance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on exile, displacement, and autobiographical writing have grown widely in postcolonial and memory studies. Many scholars point out that trauma, the loss of place, and the rebuilding of identity are closely connected. A foundational text in this field is Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile* (2000), which frames exile as a condition of "irremediable estrangement," where individuals perpetually navigate the tension between their lost world and the present one. Said's concept of "contrapuntal consciousness" has been pivotal in analyses of life writing emerging from exilic contexts, particularly works that intertwine personal memory with collective dispossession. This framework is echoed in the scholarship of authors such as Diana Taylor and Svetlana Boym, who examine how displaced individuals construct inner geographies that compensate for the absence of a physical homeland.

Diaspora theorists like James Clifford (1997), Khachig Tölölyan (1996), and Robin Cohen (2008) extend this discourse by asserting that diasporic belonging is shaped as much by cultural memory and affective geography as by physical dispersal. Clifford's assertion that diaspora is defined by "routes as much as roots" is particularly relevant to

memoirs such as Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's *A Home in Tibet* and Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima*, both of which draw upon inherited memories, intergenerational trauma, and the yearning for landscapes often accessible only through imagination. These theoretical perspectives are reinforced by Doreen Massey's work in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), which challenges static conceptions of place and instead posits space as relational, constituted through intersections of memory, politics, embodiment, and social encounter. Her insights are crucial for understanding how geopolitical violence is inscribed in the spatial imagination of exiled subjects.

Tibetan exile literature has been explored by scholars such as Tsering Shakya (1993), Shelly Bhattacharya (2015), and Clare Harris (2014), who argue that Tibetan autobiographical writing serves both as personal testimony and cultural preservation. Bhattacharya notes that Tibetan memoirs frequently combine "archival memory" with "cultural mourning", creating narratives that document familial histories alongside national loss. Research by scholars like Trine Brox and Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia also highlights how Tibetan life writing preserves indigenous spatial epistemologies, emphasizing the intimate relationship between mountain landscapes, Buddhist cosmology, and identity formation. These studies contextualize Dhompa's work within a broader tradition of exilic Tibetan self-narration.

Similarly, Palestinian life writing has garnered considerable attention in postcolonial scholarship. Critics such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Joseph Massad, Rashid Khalidi, and Nur Masalha explore how narratives of the Nakba are central to resisting historical erasure and reclaiming national memory. Abu-Lughod argues that Palestinian memoirs often blend the personal with the political to produce "counter-historical narratives" that challenge state narratives of disappearance. Khalidi's *Palestinian Identity* (1997) provides critical insight into how collective memory functions as a political tool for survival under occupation. This scholarship is essential for situating Karmi's memoir, which reconstructs pre-1948 Jerusalem through a deeply embodied recollection of home, neighborhood, and domestic intimacy.

Despite extensive scholarship on Tibetan and Palestinian autobiographical writing in isolation, comparative studies remain relatively scarce. Most analyses focus on singular national histories rather than broader thematic intersections among different exilic communities. Furthermore, there is limited engagement with critical spatial theories, such as Lefebvre's lived space or Massey's relational space, as overarching conceptual frameworks for interpreting exile memoirs, creating a significant scholarly gap.

Therefore, a comparative, theoretically informed exploration of spatial memory in Tibetan and Palestinian memoirs is necessary. Such an approach enables an understanding of how life writing transforms displacement into narrative agency, illustrating how mapping remembered landscapes becomes an act of resistance against geopolitical effacement and cultural erasure.

3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The aim of this paper is to perform a comparative examination of how spatial memory serves as a narrative tool for managing trauma and recreating identity in the context of forced displacement. The study examines Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's *A Home in Tibet* and Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima* to show how the literary mapping of remembered landscapes enables exiled persons to restore narrative agency and resist geopolitical erasure.

4. OBJECTIVES

The study concentrates on the following four objectives in order to achieve this aim:

1. To assess how "lived space" contributes to the creation of sustaining inner geographies from physical absence. This objective uses Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory to analyze how the writers recreate their homelands through sensory and subjective details, claiming a psychological presence that compensates for their material loss.
2. To examine the ways in which relational space embodies and expresses global violence. This purpose is based on Doreen Massey's paradigm, investigates how institutional exclusion and historical trauma are etched on the body and memory, forming the emotional characteristics of the exiled.
3. To examine the emergence of hybrid identities in the "Third Space" of exile. This goal focuses on how the ongoing struggle between the memory of a lost homeland and the reality of displacement promotes the formation of resilient, varied identities that cross traditional national or ethnic boundaries.
4. To demonstrate how narrative cartography might help people reclaim their agency. This aim evaluates how the conscious act of writing and organizing geographical experiences serves as a form of "personal mapping," allowing the authors to transition from passive victims of history to active architects of their own narrative.

5. METHODOLOGY

The study integrates critical spatial theory with postcolonial approaches to examine how exile influences memory, identity, and narrative form. Central to this framework is Henri Lefebvre's triadic conception of space, particularly **lived space** (*l'espace vécu*). Lefebvre argues that space is constructed through social practices, emotional experiences, and symbolic meanings. Lived space encompasses the subjective dimensions of space, where personal

memories and emotions are inscribed onto physical landscapes. For individuals in exile, this dimension is significant as access to their homeland is often restricted or denied.

In the memoirs of Tsering Wangmo Dhompa and Ghada Karmi, writing is a crucial practice through which lived space is created and sustained. Through memory and storytelling, both authors transform the loss of their homelands into a subjective inner geography, maintaining an emotional connection with places that are politically inaccessible. By narrating landscapes, homes, and everyday spaces, the authors resist the erasure imposed by displacement, asserting that place exists through lived experience, even when absent in material form.

This understanding is enhanced by Doreen Massey's conception of space as relational. Massey views space as a dynamic site shaped by interactions and power relations, continuously produced through social and political processes. Geopolitical forces such as colonialism and forced migration are lived experiences that shape the psychological worlds of displaced individuals. In the memoirs examined, trauma is embedded in remembered spaces like homes and neighbourhoods. Massey's framework elucidates how these spaces bear the imprint of violence while becoming sites of resistance through memory and narrative reconstruction.

The framework is further enriched by Homi Bhabha's postcolonial concept of the **Third Space**. Bhabha describes the Third Space as a hybrid site where cultural meanings and identities are negotiated. For exiled individuals, this space emerges from the tension between the memory of the homeland and the reality of displacement. Occupying a liminal position, the exiled individual forms hybrid identities. In Dhompa and Karmi's writings, this Third Space enables them to negotiate loss, reinterpret cultural belonging, and redefine the self beyond national boundaries.

Within this Third Space, memory serves as a transformative force. The authors actively reshape their identities through narrative, transcending victimhood and asserting narrative agency. Through writing, they reclaim control over their stories and redefine exile as a space of self-creation. Collectively, Lefebvre's lived space, Massey's relational space, and Bhabha's Third Space provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how spatial memory functions as both a site of trauma and a source of resilience in narratives of exile.

6. ANALYSIS

The comparative analysis of Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's *A Home in Tibet* and Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima* reveals a sophisticated narrative strategy in which spatial memory is employed to negotiate trauma and construct a cohesive identity in exile. While the specific geopolitical traumas, the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the Palestinian Nakba or Catastrophe, represent distinct historical events, the psychological impact of forcibly losing one's place is structurally analogous. In both contexts, displacement produces a profound rupture in the individual's relationship with the self and with surrounding spaces.

The Deployment of Lived Space as Inner Resistance

The primary mechanism of resistance in both narratives is the imaginative use of lived space, a key concept drawn from Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory. Karmi, exiled from her childhood home in Jerusalem, devotes considerable attention to recreating the sensory details of her house, the flavours of lost Palestinian cuisine, and the texture of family life that was abruptly severed. This intense focus on sensory and subjective detail transforms the objective loss of home into a subjectively palpable presence. Dhompa, whose experience of Tibet is mediated through her parents' exile and her own later visits, engages in a similar imaginative construction by synthesising fragmented familial memories with cultural knowledge. Such narrative practices transform what is politically absent into a subjectively present reality. This imaginative return converts physical absence into a sustaining inner geography that resists political erasure. Consequently, narrative space functions as a powerful substitute for lost physical space, affirming that the homeland is not reduced to nostalgia but continues to exist as a lived and inhabited space within the author's consciousness.

Embodiment of Geopolitical Violence through Relational Space

The memoirs also illustrate Doreen Massey's concept of space as relational, demonstrating how geopolitical violence becomes deeply embodied. Karmi describes the painful and isolating process of grappling with displacement as a young girl in the United Kingdom, where the violence of loss is experienced not as a single event but as a persistent condition of exclusion from a place to which she remains emotionally connected. She registers the erasure of Palestine through dismissive attitudes and the absence of historical recognition in her surroundings. Similarly, Dhompa embodies the transgenerational trauma of the Tibetan diaspora, in which the memory of loss is inherited and carried within the collective body of exile. The ways in which trauma takes shape within narrative expression are closely linked to the authors' relational positioning within global power structures, where their identities are continually defined in opposition to dominant occupying narratives. Trauma, therefore, is not abstract but embodied and shaped by the relational dynamics between occupier and displaced subject, illustrating how geopolitical violence is inscribed onto the body, memory, and narrative voice.

The Hybrid Self as an Agency-Reclaiming Synthesis

The negotiation between memory and displacement leads to a hybrid identity that occupies Homi Bhabha's Third Space. Both Dhompa and Karmi inhabit cultural positions shaped by multiple geographies and histories. Dhompa identifies as Tibetan, but her upbringing in India and life in the United States place her in a fluid cultural terrain beyond a single national or ethnic framework. Similarly, Karmi remains deeply Palestinian in memory and political consciousness while embedded in the professional, social, and cultural landscape of Britain. These identities are not compromises formed through loss but powerful syntheses shaped by constant negotiation between memory and displacement.

Their narratives do not seek a return to a singular identity rooted solely in the homeland. Instead, they articulate a layered sense of self that carries the weight of historical loss while engaging with the realities of exile. This hybrid identity emerges as a creative response to displacement rather than a symptom of fragmentation. The analysis shows that exile does not inevitably lead to psychic disintegration; it can generate resilient forms of selfhood that draw strength from multiplicity. Identity becomes a process rather than a fixed state, shaped through the interplay of remembered landscapes and present conditions. The formation of the hybrid self is an act of agency, grounded in reflection, negotiation, and narrative articulation.

Narrative as Cartography: Reclaiming Agency

In both memoirs, this negotiation culminates in reclaiming narrative agency. By mapping remembered landscapes through detailed descriptions of streets, homes, everyday sounds, and intimate family spaces, the authors transition from passive subjects of historical displacement to active storytellers. This process is more than recollection; it is a deliberate act through which memory is organized, shaped, and given meaning.

Writing becomes a form of cartography, where memory functions as a tool for reconstructing a sense of place and self. Through this personal mapping, Dhompa and Karmi create parallel narrative worlds that resist political erasure and historical silencing. The study shows that articulating remembered spaces allows the authors to reclaim authority over their experiences and identities. This personal cartography becomes a stabilizing structure through which fragmentation caused by political violence is confronted and reassembled. Belonging is not recovered through physical return to a homeland but secured within the narrative space of the memoir itself. Through storytelling, exile transforms from a condition of loss into a site of meaning, coherence, and self-assertion.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper contends that the memoirs of Tsering Wangmo Dhompa and Ghada Karmi transcend mere chronological accounts of loss and instead represent active engagements in spatial reclamation. Through a critical spatial lens, the study demonstrates how the authors transform the political realities of exile into personalised imaginative geographies that function as safeguards against fragmentation.

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's concept of lived space, the analysis illustrates that the detailed and often nostalgic descriptions of the homeland operate as a vital mechanism for converting absence into a sustaining inner geography that resists political erasure. This literary cartography re-establishes an internal connection to place that external political forces cannot sever. The relational understanding of space articulated by Doreen Massey further reveals that the trauma of displacement is not simply a singular psychological injury but is structurally shaped and embodied by geopolitical conflict. As a result, trauma takes form within narrative expression through lived encounters with power, loss, and exclusion. The ongoing negotiation between memory of the past and the realities of the present, situated within Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, ultimately leads to the formation of resilient hybrid identities. These identities are not passive outcomes of loss but are dynamically shaped through constant negotiation between memory and displacement.

The significance of these memoirs is most clearly realised in their concluding act through the use of narrative as a form of mapping. The deliberate act of mapping remembered landscapes enables both Dhompa and Karmi to move from the position of the displaced subject to that of the narrative architect, thereby reclaiming narrative agency. This creation of a personal cartography of the self-offers a compelling model for how exiled individuals can confront fragmentation and rebuild a sense of belonging. Rather than relying on physical return, belonging is secured by anchoring the homeland within the narrative space of the memoir itself. This narrative anchoring asserts the self against forces of erasure and fragmentation. The effectiveness of this process across two distinct yet structurally comparable contexts, Tibetan and Palestinian, underscores the broader significance of spatial memory as a powerful resource for resilience in the face of geopolitical violence. Future research may extend this inquiry by examining how digital spaces further complicate and enable contemporary forms of spatial reclamation among dispersed diasporic communities.

8. LIMITATIONS

The comparative analysis of life writing through the lens of critical spatial theory provides valuable insights into individual trauma and resistance; however, this approach is not without its limitations. The primary limitation of this methodology lies in the difficulty of extending individual life writing accounts to the wider experiences of dispersed diasporic communities. The highly personalised and subjective nature of memoir means that the authors' expressions of spatial memory and their journeys towards a hybrid identity may not accurately represent the diverse experiences within the broader Tibetan and Palestinian diasporas. A singular account inevitably foregrounds a specific set of circumstances, family histories, and personal psychological processes. This subjectivity carries the risk of generalising an individual's response to trauma as a collective experience, thereby potentially marginalising narratives from refugees whose experiences differ in terms of class, gender, generation, or political positioning within the same diaspora.

Furthermore, while the emphasis on literary analysis is crucial for understanding narrative agency, it may inadvertently reduce the political immediacy of these texts by privileging psychological and spatial concerns over material and ongoing political struggles. Although the study does not treat the memoirs solely as political testimonies, there remains a possibility that the broader political dimensions of exile, including sustained activism, demands for return, and the economic realities of refugee life, may receive less attention in favour of internal and imaginative geographies.

Finally, the theoretical framework itself presents certain challenges. Concepts such as lived space and Third Space, while analytically productive, are abstract and require careful application. Without sustained grounding in textual specificity, there is a risk that individual voices and unique experiences of trauma may be subsumed within theoretical categories. This could result in complex human experiences being reduced to illustrative examples of theory rather than being recognised in their full emotional and historical particularity. Acknowledging these limitations is therefore essential to maintaining a balanced and ethically attentive reading of exile narratives.

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