

## Spatial Politics and the Construction of Home in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*

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### ABSTRACT

*In the time of conflicts the place we call home, as in where we live, becomes so much more than just that. It is the site of trauma, resilience and hope. The novel As Long As the Lemon Trees Grow by Zoulfia Katouh (2022) is a story of a girl Salama Kassab who studies to become a pharmacist but the fate has some other plans for her. The novel explains how the war in Syria changes her. How her trauma and fear come forward in some twisted ways that she cannot even realize it at first. How Khawf lingers around her helped her making sure her survival. How she calls herself by murmuring flowers and there usage under her breath. In this article we explore the construction of home from physical destructions and the emotional memory. Using ideas from geocriticism and memory studies, this paper argues that even though the city of Homs is in ruins but the personal recollection still helps to rebuild a sense of home. Edward Soja's third space theory emerges portraying Syria as a place of in between identity, where staying and leaving are both painful choices, and where survival means existing between past and present. The lemon trees in this novel offers hope amid chaos. No matter how many voices they kill or suppress there will always be more to fight them. These bombs are not lower our spirits. The novel shows that home is not just a building but it is a dynamic and changing space shaped by history, politics and emotions.*

**Keywords:** Trauma, Resilience, Geocriticism, Third space, Soja, Politics

### INTRODUCTION

The disruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011 ruptured not just buildings and borders but also the emotional texture of daily life for millions of people. Once thriving neighborhoods became battlefields, places tied to childhood recollections, familial connections, and shared community were destroyed. The philosophical experience of home shifted for those impacted by the unrest, especially young people, from a site of safety, to remembrance, and longing, to a site of trauma, loss and displacement. The rupture

extended deeper than the geographical territory of Syrian land; it fundamentally altered the psychological and emotional territories people developed. Within this space of rupture, storytelling, specifically literary storytelling emerged for many as a device of preservation, resistance and emotional survival. Through their fiction, authors have acknowledged the unrealities produced by war while touching on their collective histories of hope, memory and identity. Katouh's (2022) *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* is an important contribution to this critical literary landscape. By presenting the Syrian crisis not just through cold facts but through the emotion of a young girl's navigation of grief, fear and belonging, the novel addresses the harsh realities of war while occupying new spaces of intersubjectivity. Katouh (2022) asserts "Survivor's remorse is a second skin we are cursed to wear forever." (p.120). Thus, Katouh's (2022) novel provides insight into the cruelties of war while also providing some reflection on how trauma transforms safety, sustains discomfort and reconstitutes our emotional states and attachment to space.

What does one do when the home one considers safe is suddenly the most dangerous spot one can find oneself? When the playground where one used to play as a child is now filled with ruins, soldiers, and terror? For most people trapped in war-torn zones, home shifts from a sanctuary of comfort and safety to a point of danger and trauma. And yet, even when they have to run, individuals take their concept of home with them in memory, in language, culture, and imagination. This is where literature is so strong. It teaches us how people go through such radical alterations in their physical and emotional geography, and how they attempt to make sense of what home is when all the familiar things disappear.

In this article, the connections between spatial politics and the construction of home within Katouh's (2022) novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* will be explored. The novel tells the story of Salama, a young girl who lost near everything yet insists on remaining grounded in hope, memory, and love of the homeland during early Syrian civil war years. As bombs rain down and individuals vanish, Salama has to choose whether to flee the nation she loves or stay and risk her life for it. Through her, the novel presents a profoundly emotional investigation of what it is to belong to a nation that is being destroyed by violence. It also poses significant questions regarding how war and politics influence individual's sense of space, identity, and home.

To understand the themes of this article, it's important to define two key terms. First is "spatial politics". In simple terms, spatial politics is about how space, whether it's a city, a neighborhood, or even a home, is shaped by power. Who gets to live where? Who is pushed out? Who controls the land, the buildings, and the borders? In times of war, the answers to these questions become even more urgent. Governments and militaries make choices that rebuild whole cities and displace millions of people. Public space becomes insecure, and private space is invaded or destroyed. Spatial politics reminds us that space is never neutral, it's always connected to broader systems of control, violence, or resistance. The second important term is "construction of home". When we think about home, we tend to picture a house, a room, a familiar neighborhood. But for those who have lost them, home is something different: a memory, a scent, a tune, or even a person. Home is continuously built and rebuilt, not only in terms of physical buildings but also through emotions, narratives, and connections. In refugee stories, this process is particularly apparent. Characters are usually attempting to recreate a sense of home in new or temporary locations, or they're attempting to preserve the memory of their original home even when they realize they may never return. (Somerville, 1997)

We selected *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* because it encapsulate both of these concepts, spatial politics and the emotional construction of home, in a manner that feels real, urgent, and heartfelt. It's not another war tale. It's a tale of loss, resistance, and survival narrated through the lens of a young girl who is still searching for love and purpose amongst cruelty. Salama's journey is not only physical, it's psychological and emotional. She struggles with PTSD, guilt, and fear, but also with love, hope, and the will to live. Katouh (2022) asserts "And we will come back... Insha'Allah we will come back home. We

will plant new lemon trees. We will rebuild our cities, and we will be free.” (p. 235). What's great about the novel is the way that it takes these grand, political ideas and brings them down to close, ordinary moments, sitting down to eat, strolling along a street that's been bombed, or remembering the scent of lemon trees. These tiny moments teach us about how much people are embedded in the places where they live, even when the places themselves are disintegrating.

Another reason I picked this book is that it's a young adult novel. So often, people downplay young adult novels because they think they're too easy to handle real issues. But Katouh shows us that isn't the case. Her writing is beautiful, forceful, and filled with depth. By publishing for child readers, she begins vital conversations regarding war, displacement, and belonging that resonate not only for Syrians but also for young people in general. With millions of young people in the world living in refugee camps, in exile, or in post-conflict states, these types of stories are critical at this time. From an academic perspective, I saw that there is a hole regarding how young adult books, particularly those from or about the Middle East, are analyzed using the structure of spatial theory. While research exists for the most part on adult refugee fiction and nonfiction books, these are not always representative of the personal, imaginative, and emotional space of teenagers surviving conflict. Katouh's (2022) book provides us with that world in rich detail, and so it is a useful text for examining how home and space are imagined and lived under conditions of extremity.

Moreover, there is poor engagement with space's emotional and symbolic dimensions of space in literature studies, especially in young adult literature. Scholarship is often invested in writing about topics like trauma, identity, or migration, but not how space itself is a character in the text. In *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, the spaces Salama travels through (the hospital, her home, the streets of Homs, and even imaginary safe spaces) are emotional spaces. They are not just characters or backgrounds, they adapt, change over time and can define who she is and who she will become within the narrative. To look at the spaces through the lens of spatial politics reveals how war impacts bodies and people's relationships to space, memory, and self.

This paper will examine how the novel represents space not merely as political, but an emotional and political contested space. We will also theorize how Salama's understanding of home evolved over time, and this evolution became conceptually about something from a concrete material place to an abstract emotional place that is frequently painful. And we will discuss how the novel presents public spaces like hospitals or streets as sites of danger and resistance, while private spaces like bedrooms or kitchens become sites of memory and loss. Finally, it will considered how Salama's imagination, visions, memories, and hopes help to construct home even while it is being destroyed.

In conclusion, this study seeks to show how *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* is a rich text for an examination of home and space in tension. By analyzing the novel through spatial politics and emotional geography, the novel is able to demonstrate how war not only changes the physical landscape but fundamentally alters how we engage with it. It also reminds us that home is not where we live but something we carry, reconstruct, and in some cases cry over. Given that it focuses the narrative on a young Syrian woman, the novel, and this project, hope to contextualize a fuller, more human understanding of what it means to lose and rebuild a sense of place in a fragmented world.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In examining the space politics and home construction of *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, a number of academic texts and critical critiques offer insightful frameworks and comprehension. Soja's (1996) theory of Thirdspace, as set out in *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, provides a theoretical basis. Soja (1996) suggests that space is not solely a geographical or physical space

but one that is socially and emotionally constructed. This theoretical framework is of relevance when analyzing Salama's changing understanding of home during the Syrian war, where established concepts of domestic space are ruptured and revised through memory and emotional resistance. Massey's (2005) *For Space*, also adds to this analysis by stressing that places are fluid, influenced by interactions, travel, and relations of power. Massey's (2005) viewpoint helps to explain how Salama's experiences, transcending war-torn spaces and building new relationships assist in a reimagined concept of home beyond physical boundaries.

Caruth's (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* discusses the psychological effects of trauma and how traumatic experience can disrupt a person's concept of time and space. This comes to mind in understanding Salama's hallucination of Khawf, an expression of her internalized guilt and fear, a sign of the pervasiveness of trauma within her mental and emotional realms. Edward Said's (2000) musings in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, offer an understanding of the elaborateness of displacement and yearning for return. Said explains how exile may cause a redefined sense of belonging to one's homeland, where the possibility of return becomes a strong metaphor for hope and identity maintenance. This speaks to Salama's constant concentration with planting lemon trees, symbolizing a profound need to repossess and restructure her idea of home.

Critical reviews also shed light on the novel's thematic depth. An article from Canterbury Christ Church University's Politics Blog (2025) highlights how Katouh's narrative focuses on the personal and human aspects of the Syrian revolution, emphasizing the resilience of ordinary individuals between turbulence. The review notes the symbolic significance of nature, particularly lemon trees, as representations of survival and continuity. In the same vein, *Solidarities* review touches on the novel's examination of refugees' guilt and inner conflict. It highlights how Salama's storyline goes against stereotypes, offering a multidimensional representation of the emotional costs of displacement and the act of abandoning one's country. An interview with Katouh (2022) in *The Mary Sue* (2022) uncovers the author's purpose to humanize the Syrian experience and bring down common stereotypes. Katouh (2022) makes a point of illustrate Muslim characters in a realistic way and presenting the difficulties of the Syrian conflict through individual stories.

These critical studies and academic papers cumulatively enrich knowledge of the politics of space and the building of home in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, offering a multi-dimensional framework through which to understand Salama's journey and the wider implications of displacement and resilience.

## DISCUSSION

The research aim of this paper is to investigate how spatial politics affect the building, destruction, and rebuilding of home in Katouh's (2022) *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*. This aim stems from a passion to learn how war and displacement shatter not just physical spaces but also the cultural, emotional, and psychological aspects of home. This research employs an interdisciplinary methodology that draws on spatial theory, trauma studies, and migration scholarship to deconstruct the multiple and often disjointed ways in which the concept of home operates within the novel.

The reasoning for this aim is that in the global landscape of today, millions of individuals have been forced out of their homes due to war, global warming, and political persecution. Katouh's (2022) novel makes this crisis personal by telling Salama Kassab's, a young Syrian woman, story as she observes her home unraveling not only physically but also emotionally and culturally. Katouh (2022) asserts "Happiness starts here, Salama. In this home. In Old Homs. Remember?" (p.122). The research hopes to demonstrate that home is not merely a place, it is a space filled with memory, belonging, language, relations, and power. Through the life of Salama, we observe how politics of space have a direct influence

on her perception of herself, her community, and her future. The idea of spatial politics is that of how power is validated through the meaning, organization, and control of space. It involves not just the utilization or occupation of space, but its contestation, destruction, or reimagining. In Katouh's (2022) novel, we witness this dramatically in the bombing of houses, the shutdown of borders, and the redefinition of secure domestic space as spaces of trauma and surveillance. As Edward Soja (1996) theorizes in his *Thirdspace*, space is not empty or neutral it is socially produced, experienced, and lived. The aim of this research is to examine how Salama lives space in this socially constructed, war-torn environment and how her home-making changes over time.

This goal also relates to trauma theory, specifically the writing of authors such as Cathy Caruth (1996), who put forward that trauma not only shatters an individual's sense of time but also their sense of space. Survivors of trauma tend to struggle to feel at home in their bodies, minds, or worlds. This confusion is illustrated in Salama's visions of Khawf, an expression of her fear and guilt. He stalks her like a war ghost, entering her inner space and disrupting her reality. Katouh (2022) asserts "he could completely alter my reality, unleashing hallucination upon hallucination, showing everyone that the exterior I've put up is nothing more than brittle twigs against a strong wind..."(p.12). Part of this research task is to see how trauma enters both physical and spiritual spaces, such that even the concept of home becomes an arena of conflict.

Concurrently, the study will try to discover ways in which home can be symbolically or emotionally rebuilt in the face of such trauma. The novel keeps returning to the image of lemon trees metaphors of memory, survival, and the non-stop attachment to land and culture. The trees are more than botanical descriptions; they are devices of the narrative that carry emotional importance. When Salama remembers the lemon tree in her home courtyard, it is a mental haven and an imaginary return. The goal here is to look at how memory and cultural symbols serve as resources of spatial reimagination, helping displaced persons such as Salama to reconstruct home where there is a lack of physical stability.

And also included as part of this goal is the analysis of how gender influences experiences of space and home within the novel. Salama's positions as woman, caregiver, and survivor inform her engagement with space in different manners. Scholars like Doreen Massey (1994) *Space, Place and Gender* have also argued that space is gendered; women's mobility and safety in space are usually restricted by societal structures. Salama, in Katouh's (2022) novel, works in traditionally feminine spaces such as the home and the hospital, but both of these are used as sites of violence during war. By investigating those dynamics, this paper aims to straighten the research goal into that of feminist spatial critique, reveals how women negotiate, refuse, and reclaim space in conditions of pressure.

Another aspect of this objective includes exploring the function of borders and geopolitical authorities as an extension of spatial politics. As Salama attempts to flee Syria, she faces a mass of physical and administrative obstacles: fake documents, risky smuggler paths, and the threat of arrest. This shows the manner in which bodily movement is not accessible in the same way to everybody, certain individuals are permitted to pass, whereas other bodies are left behind. Drawing on Lisa Malkki's (1995) work on refugees, this research investigates how state systems assign or deny spatial legitimacy, effectively deciding who is "at home" and who is "out of place." The objective here is not only to study the effects of displacement but to critique the structures that create and enforce it.

Moreover, the paper seeks to explore how emotional relationships act as new forms of home-making. In a world where houses fall down and long-standing neighborhoods become unfamiliar, Salama finds pieces of home in her friendship with Kenan and her protection of her pregnant sister-in-law, Layla. These acts of bonding give her flashes of belonging and shelter that deny the ordinary idea that home is a matter of land or buildings. Rather, this study claims, home becomes a web of affective connections and mutual



futures. This transformation of a material into an affective geography is significant to the research aim, as it highlights the novel's vision of healing and survival. Finally, the aim of this research is to position *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* in the larger context of war literature and diasporic fiction, where the fight to claim home is a dominant theme. Through cross-disciplinary linkages, the paper establishes connections with other critical works that question the significance of home after violence and expulsion. In so doing, the research not only provides a close reading of the novel but is also part of the current academic discourses on displacement, resilience, and politics of space.

With the narrative of Salama Kassab in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, Katouh (2022) seriously examines how war warps physical space, but also the emotional concept of home. What resonates with me most while reading the novel is that "home" isn't merely a four-walled space, it is memory, comfort, identity, and even a site of resistance. The research goal allowed me to notice how redefines war the meaning of home and how Salama's experience is representative of larger concepts regarding space, displacement, and living. I also discovered that home is not fully gone it is continually redefining itself in Salama's imagination and heart. Salama's relationship with her home in Homs is one of warmth and memory from the moment we meet her at the beginning of the novel. She recalls the home, including her family, the lemon tree in the courtyard, and the daily comfort of routine living. These recollections indicate the emotional richness of home as a refuge. But with the intensification of war, this home is made alien and fearsome. One of the strong lines that really hit me was when Salama states, "The rest of the way back home reminds me of the black-and-white pictures my history textbooks showed of Germany and London after World War II. Flattened homes spilling their interior wood and concrete like a perforated intestine." (Katouh, 2022, p.3). This is an alarming metaphor, it reveals not only destruction but the manner in which personal and historical trauma intertwine. Her house is turned into a war zone, and the loss is not merely material, it's emotional and psychological.

This made us reflect on what the theorist Soja (1996) means when he writes that space is socially produced. In the novel, space is produced by the brutality of war, but also by how people live in it, resist in it, or are compelled to escape from it. The hospital, for instance, is a strange sort of home for Salama. Although it is dangerous and filled with death, it's also where she continues to struggle for others, where she continues to find meaning and purpose. This tension between comfort and terror made me see that space is made so complicated by war. Another section of my analysis is on the character Khawf, who is the physical representation of Salama's fear and guilt. He accompanies her everywhere and addresses her when everyone else cannot. Khawf reveals how war interrupt even into the most close, inner spaces, our minds. When trauma fills up the mental space like this, even your thoughts are not safe anymore. Salama can't help but flee the war because it's not only outside of her it's within her. This made me think of what trauma theorist Caruth (1996) states: trauma doesn't merely shatter memory; it unsettles the architecture of experience itself. I observed this in the way Salama continues to plan her flight but feels guilty leaving behind her homeland, demonstrating the tension between survival and loyalty to her country.

The picture of the lemon tree was particularly affecting me. It occurs repeatedly in the novel as a metaphor for home, memory, and defiance. Salama repeatedly goes back to imagining planting lemon trees again when she's safe. In perhaps the most optimistic scene, she says, "We will come back. Insha'Allah we will come back home" (Katouh, 2022, p.235). We will have new lemon trees. This line is not wishful thinking. This line is evidence of how envisioning home can be an act of survival. It gives her the strength to continue. I attached this to what Soja (1996) describes exile to mean that even the prospect of return ensures one's identity is maintained. Therefore, for Salama, the lemon trees symbolize home that continues to reside within her even as all around is crumbling. Lastly, we were impressed by the way Salama constructs new versions of home in relationships. Her relationship with Kenan provides her with stability, and her love for Layla and the unborn child gives her resilience. These relationships are

emotional moorings amidst a world that continuously shatters. It reminded me that home is not just a space, it can be the people whom you choose to live for. Katouh (2022) ensures that even in war, love and compassion can rebuild a sense of home. In general, my breakdown of the research objective allowed me to see that *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* is more than a war story. It's a powerful examination of how home can be lost, but also reimagined in new terms. Through Salama's visions, I came to understand that space is political, emotional, and very human. The book instilled in me that even among the most violent circumstances, individuals still somehow manage to cling to hope and to imagine home.

## CONCLUSION

The investigation of spatial politics and home-making in Katouh's (2022) *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* uncovers an intensely complex story that weaves together physical space, identity, trauma, and resilience in the ruins of the Syrian civil war. In this research, it has been demonstrated how the novel subverts conventional, static definitions of home by presenting its contested and fluid nature in conflict and displacement contexts. The novel presents a strong image of the way war reconstitutes not merely the land of the earth but also the emotional and psychological spheres of human beings, forcing a restructuring of home in terms that are non-physical and nonlinear.

Among the major discoveries of this study is the realization that home in Katouh's (2022) novel is never ever a mere physical location or a material building. Instead, it emerges as a socially and emotionally constructed space shaped by memory, relationships, and the desire for continuity between rupture. Through the character of Salama Kassab, readers witness how home is simultaneously lost and preserved: lost in the violent destruction of Homs and the forced migration it causes, yet preserved in the symbolic presence of lemon trees, an enduring symbol of cultural identity, hope, and regeneration. This is in line with Soja's (1996) and Massey's (2005) theoretical discussions, where space as relational, socially constructed, and full of power relations is expressed. Katouh's (2022) graphic description of the politics of space reveals the ways war moves strategically against civilian space as a tool of domination and effacement. The destruction of homes, hospitals, and neighborhoods is not accidental or collateral but an intentional spatial manipulation that destabilizes community links and compels identities to be uprooted. Salama's story takes place within these ruptured spaces, like the Zaytouna hospital that is a zone of refuge and trauma in-between. This underscores the novel's questioning of spatial politics as violence that not only regulates exterior surroundings but also interior psychic topographies.

The study also highlights the psychic effects of spatial dislocation, particularly through Salama's vision of Khawf, the internalized guilt and fear. This haunting figure represents the way trauma infiltrates psychic space, shattering perceptions of home and safety. Trauma studies offer here a critical framework in which the blending of spatial dislocation and psychic fragmentation can be understood, and the impossibility of separating external from internal narratives of war and displacement highlighted.

In addition, the symbolic meaning of lemon trees captures a complex connotation of home that involves endurance, cultural memory, and aspiration for return. Salama's dream of planting new lemon trees is an act of resistance to involuntary exile and identity recovery. It represents a shared desire within displaced groups to restore and re-ground themselves, highlighting the strategic value of cultural symbols in maintaining psychological and communal continuity.

The study also shows how Katouh (2022) leverages interpersonal relations to rebuild a sense of home outside of physical space. Salama's, Kenan's, Layla's, and the other characters' close ties provide emotional geographies of trust, love, and care that become bases for making new homes. This adds to migration scholarship highlighting the social nature of home-making, where one is constantly negotiating belonging through human relations.

In addition, Katouh's (2022) analysis of global spatial politics expands the novel's focus from the local to the international. The description of administrative roadblocks, limbo for refugees, and geopolitical imbalances of power highlights how spatial control functions at various scales, determining who is entitled to call home their own and who is relegated to statelessness. Such an international dimension compels readers to think about how war's spatial politics are intertwined with international policies and humanitarian agendas.

### **FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH**

This study uncovers several avenues for future scholarly investigation of *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* and the general study of war, displacement, and home literature.

First, future research could adopt a comparative lens that situates Katouh's (2022) novel alongside other contemporary war narratives, especially those emerging from the Middle East, such as Samar Yazbek's *The Crossing* or Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. Comparative analysis could deepen understanding of how different authors conceptualize spatial politics and home across varied contexts of conflict and displacement.

Second, interdisciplinary methods integrating literary analysis with geography, sociology, and psychology would further enhance the study of space and identity. Ethnographic methods or narrative psychology (1986) could investigate how displaced community members connect to Katouh's (2022) representation of trauma and home, thereby bridging textual analysis with real-life experience.

Third, more can be done in terms of gendered aspects of spatial politics. Although this study briefly mentioned Salama's work as a young woman during war, a feminist spatial analysis would explore how gender affects access to, control over, and representation of home in places under conflict.

Fourth, future scholarship could investigate the role of cultural symbols like lemon trees in other diasporic literatures, exploring how botanical metaphors function as anchors of memory and resistance. Such studies could contribute to an emerging field of eco-criticism that connects environmental symbolism with human geography and migration.

Fifth, Katouh's (2022) novel calls for an exploration of digital and virtual realms as new grounds of home-making for the displaced. As contemporary refugees become more immersed in social media and cyber communities, an examination of how such virtual realms overlap with physical displacement would be well-timed.

Lastly, policy-oriented research might follow from this literary critique, investigating the manner in which spatial politics and the production of home within war fiction might be applied to humanitarian interventions and refugee support networks. Lessons based on the novel's presentation of bureaucratic violence and psychological displacement can lead to more comprehensive aid strategies that take into account emotional and spatial aspects of refugee life.

### **FINAL REFLECTION**

Overall, *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* excel the genre of a typical war novel by interweaving a rich shades of spatial, psychological, and cultural strands. Katouh's (2022) textual powerfully says the multifaceted politics of home during times of distress, provoking readers to reexamine presumptions about place, belonging, and resilience. The novel's involvement in spatial politics is not simply scholarly but fundamentally humanistic, highlighting the longstanding ability of people and communities to reclaim, rebuild, and reimagine home in the face of apparently hopeless trouble.



This study has shown that home is not a fixed backdrop but a live, contested land upon which identity is constantly negotiated and maintained. The novel's rich imagery, symbolic motifs, and complex characters offer rich land for continued investigation of how literature can shed light on the lived experiences of displacement and the politics of space transformation. As conflicts continue to wash out the world and displacement becomes a signature mark of the 21st century, what is learned from Katouh's book will find continued application, giving hope and critical thought to readers, scholars, and policymakers.

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