



Symbolic Construction of Homeland in Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long As The Lemon Trees Grow*

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-06-10 Revised: 2026-06-15 Accepted: 2026-06-30 Keywords: <i>diaspora;</i> <i>homeland;</i> <i>plant imagery;</i> <i>symbolic representation;</i> <i>Syrian diaspora fiction</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.11560 Corresponding Author: Shabrina Nurul Fauziyyah shabrinanurul0303@gmail.com English Literature Department, Faculty of Adab and Humanities, UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, Indonesia	<i>Syrian diaspora literature often engages with the experience of displacement by keeping the homeland alive through imagination. This study examines how Zoulfa Katouh's debut novel, <i>As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow</i> (2022), uses plant and environmental imagery to symbolically construct the meaning of homeland within a Syrian diaspora context. Previous studies have addressed trauma, ecology, and romantic narrative, but none has closely examined how the novel's recurring natural imagery functions as a structured symbolic strategy. This study fills that gap by analyzing selected textual passages containing recurring natural imagery to show how these images accumulate meaning and construct a sense of belonging throughout the narrative. The analysis draws on Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, Northrop Frye's (1957) theory of literary symbolism and diaspora scholarship by Rushdie (1991), Safran (1991), and Brah (1996), applying textual analysis and close reading as its method. The findings reveal two interconnected symbolic patterns. First, plant imagery, including the daisy, jasmine, and the lemon tree, follows a symbolic trajectory from personal memory and emotional comfort toward collective endurance and imagined homeland. Second, environmental imagery, including trapped moonlight, rain, sunset, and the Mediterranean Sea, reflects the emotional conditions of siege, loss, and departure. Together, these patterns suggest that homeland in the novel is not a fixed territory but as an ongoing symbolic construction sustained through memory, sensory experience, and emotional attachment. Through an integrated application of Hall and Frye, this study demonstrates that natural imagery can serve as a primary medium for representing displacement and belonging in contemporary Syrian diaspora fiction.</i>

1. Introduction

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, displaced millions of Syrians into countries they had never known. Displacement, however, does not entail forgetting: for those who were displaced, whether to refugee camps, unfamiliar cities, or entirely new countries, Syria remained present, not merely as a distant memory but as something that continued to feel real and meaningful. Although the homeland could no longer be physically reached, it persisted in the minds and feeling of those who have left. This tension between the reality of displacement and the effort to sustain a sense of belonging has been explored extensively in Syrian diaspora writing, in which the act of writing itself becomes a way of “coming home” in a place that is not home (Brah, 2005; Safran, 1991).

It is this context that Zoulfa Katouh's debut novel, *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022), becomes a significant work worth examining. The novel is set in Homs, Syria during the revolution, at a time when the city was already under siege but its characters had not yet left. Although the narrative therefore precedes physical displacement, it still engages centrally with diaspora literature's core corners: the anticipation of exile, the imagined loss of home, and the struggle to hold onto belonging as departure becomes inevitable. Read from Katouh's own diasporic vantage point as a Syrian-Canadian author, the novel captures homeland as something that begins turning into memory even before the characters cross any border, which justifies a diaspora-oriented reading.

The main character, Salama, is an eighteen-year-old pharmacy student who finds herself working as an emergency caregiver in a hospital nearly destroyed by war. Surrounded by ongoing destruction, Salama faces an agonizing choice: remain in a homeland that is falling apart, or leave toward a future she cannot yet picture. What makes Katouh's approach distinctive is that she does not portray homeland through national borders or political symbols. Instead, she brings it to life through the natural world, including lemon trees, flowers, soil, and the sensory details of Syrian life. These elements are not simply background scenery: they are the novel's way of asking what homeland really means and how it manages to survive even in its absence.

Before moving into the literary analysis, it is worth clarifying what “homeland” means within diaspora studies. Homeland is not simply the place where a person was born; it is a place that is imagined, longed for, and rebuilt in the mind. Rushdie (1991) argues that those forced to leave cannot carry everything with them and instead reassemble their homeland from fragments, incomplete memories, faded recollections, and the feelings attached to places they can no longer reach. What emerges from this process is not a false homeland but an imagined one, no less meaningful for being built from feeling rather than physical ground. Brah (1996) adds a useful distinction between “the desire for homeland,” an idealized, longed-for place, and “the homing desire,” an active drive to feel at home wherever one finds oneself.

This distinction offers a direct analytical anchor for the discussion that follows: in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, it helps differentiate characters who remain fixed on an idealized, unreachable Syria from those who, like Salama, enact a homing desire by locating Syria in the small, living things that surround her, a pattern to which the symbolic analysis in this study returns.

To understand how this symbolic process works within the text, this study draws on two theoretical frameworks applied in a complementary rather than overlapping way. The first is Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation and cultural identity, which treats cultural identity not as fixed or given but as something continuously shaped through the ways a community represents the world around it. The second is Northrop Frye's (1957) theory of literary symbolism, which explains that images recurring throughout a literary

work accumulate meaning with each repetition, eventually forming symbolic patterns that carry far more weight than their surface meaning suggest.

The two frameworks address different stages of the same process: Frye accounts for how those symbols come to participate in constructing cultural meanings of homeland for diaspora readership. Read together, they allow this study to ask not only what natural symbols appear in the novel, but why their repeated presence becomes its main strategy for constructing a sense of homeland. This analysis is further situated within diaspora studies, particularly Safran's (1991) account of how diasporic identity is continually shaped by shared narratives about the homeland and the hope of eventual return.

Previous research on this novel has offered useful but partial perspectives. Anganita and Latumeten (2024) approach the novel through ecocriticism, focusing on the relationship between humans and the natural environment during wartime. While this reading illuminates ecological destruction in the narrative, it treats natural elements mainly as environmental concerns rather than as a structured system of symbols. Machmuri et al. (2025) focus on trauma, displacement, and romantic elements in the novel without closely examining the symbolic logic behind its use of plants and landscape. More broadly, studies on Middle Eastern diaspora fiction, including works by writers such as Khaled Hosseini and Hala Alyan, have tended to focus on how homeland is rebuilt through human memory, family stories, and personal relationships, while treating nature as mere background atmosphere rather than as a meaningful symbolic layer (Hassan, 2011; Sellman, 2018).

What these studies have not fully addressed is a more fundamental question about literary form: how does the pattern of natural imagery in this novel function as a strategy for constructing the meaning of homeland? Earlier studies have touched on ecology, trauma, or romance, but limited attention has been given to how these natural images accumulate and build meaning from beginning to end. This gap matters because the novel's strength lies not in its story of loss alone, but in how it uses nature as a medium for reconstructing a sense of belonging to a place left behind.

With this in mind, the study aims to: (1) identify and analyze the plant and environmental symbols that recur throughout *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*; (2) trace the narrative patterns through which these symbols gradually build their symbolic function; and (3) show that the repeated appearance of these symbols constitutes a representational strategy, in the sense Hall (1997) describes, through which the novel constructs a sense of homeland for its Syrian diaspora characters. Guided by these aims, the study addresses one central question: how does the recurring pattern of natural imagery in the novel function as a representational strategy for constructing a sense of homeland among its Syrian diaspora characters? The contribution of this study lies in applying an integrated.

Hall-Frye framework to a contemporary Syrian diaspora novel, offering a literary reading that moves beyond trauma-centered approaches and examines more closely the symbolic architecture Katouh builds. In doing so, it aims to enrich the broader field of diaspora literature and symbolic representation, particularly in relation to writing about the natural world in Middle Eastern contexts.

2. Method

This study employs literary criticism as its research design to examine how homeland is symbolically constructed in Zoulfa Katouh's novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022). The theoretical foundation rests primarily on Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, complemented by Northrop Frye's (1957) theory of literary symbolism and Salman Rushdie's (1991) concept of the imaginary homeland.

Literary criticism is operationalized through two analytical approaches: textual analysis and close reading. Textual analysis enables researchers to investigate how meanings are produced and represented within a text, rather than treating literary works as transparent or ideologically neutral narratives (McKee, 2003). Within literary studies, this approach foregrounds the interpretation of narrative patterns, imagery, and symbolic structures through which broader cultural meanings are generated.

Within this framework, close reading is employed to examine the novel's language use, repetition, imagery, and narrative emphases. This method allows literary interpretation to move beyond surface-level description by tracing how textual details accumulate and construct meaning across the narrative as a whole (Barry, 2017). Recent methodological scholarship further affirms that close reading demands sustained and attentive engagement with textual particulars, producing interpretation that is evidence-based rather than impressionistic (Hellberg, 2017; Ohrvik, 2024)

The primary data source for this study is Katouh's novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, revised edition (2022), while secondary sources comprise scholarly books and journal publications addressing representation, symbolism, diaspora, homeland, and literary interpretation.

Data collection was carried out through repeated and systematic reading of the novel, during which every instance of daisy, jasmine, lemon tree, moonlight, rain, sunset, and sea imagery was located and logged before any passage was selected for close analysis. From this full inventory, passages were included as data when an image (a) recurred at more than one point in the narrative, (b) appeared in a scene explicitly tied to memory, loss, or belonging, and (c) showed a discernible shift in meaning across its occurrences; images that appeared only once or functioned purely as physical description were set aside.

To reduce the risk of selective interpretation or confirmation bias, passages were logged and categorized prior to interpretation, and interpretive claims were checked against the full inventory of occurrences for each image rather than against the most convenient examples. Relevant passages were then documented and organized according to the symbolic patterns through which they relate to the concept of homeland. The analytical procedure followed six steps: identification, categorization, recurrence tracing, contextual interpretation, symbolic interpretation, and representational synthesis.

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. The first involved symbolic interpretation, in which recurring natural elements were examined to determine how they transcend their literal referents and acquire symbolic significance through narrative repetition, drawing specifically on Frye's account of how an image's meaning accumulates through recurrence and how repeated images can crystallize into a stable literary symbol. The second stage involved representation analysis using Hall's framework, operationalized through his constructionist approach to meaning-making and his concepts of representation and signifying practice, through which those symbols were interpreted in terms of how they construct meanings of homeland and give expression to emotional attachment, memory, and a sense of belonging within the experience of displacement and diaspora.

Rushdie's concept of the imaginary homeland, together with Brah's and Safran's diaspora scholarship, functioned throughout as contextual interpretive lenses rather than as primary analytical frameworks: they informed how displacement, memory, and belonging were understood conceptually, while the close textual analysis itself was carried out through Frye's and Hall's frameworks. Because the study has three authors, individual interpretations of key passages were discussed collectively before being finalized, which helped guard against idiosyncratic or overly individual readings.

To make the data structure transparent, Table 1 summarizes each recurring image, its textual occurrence, narrative context, initial meaning, developed symbolic meaning, and the dimension of homeland it constructs.

Table 1. Summary of Recurring Plant and Environmental Imagery

Imagery	Textual Occurrence	Narrative Context	Initial Meaning	Developed Symbolic Meaning	Homeland Dimension
Daisy	p. 2	Opening scene, supermarket, post-destruction	Self-soothing /sensory comfort	Psychological refuge and memory anchor	Remembered homeland
Jasmine	p. 27	Recalling maternal embrace	Scent/ maternal memory	Safety and bodily attachment	Sensory homeland
Lemon tree	pp. 207, 254, 415	Childhood memory→ revolution→ title line	Personal childhood memory	Endurance, collective identity, and hope	Collective/ imagined homeland
Trapped moonlight	p. 155	Height of the siege	Blocked light/ confinement	Loss of freedom within homeland	Inaccessible homeland
Sunset after rain	p. 206	Reflective, general statement	Beauty following hardship	Loss deepening attachment	Valued/ intensified homeland
Mediterranean Sea	p. 379	Moment of departure from Syria	Personification of departure	Threshold between homeland and exile	Homeland–diaspora transition

3. Result

Plant Imagery as a Symbol of Homeland

In presenting these findings, textual observation is reported first for each image, followed by a more limited interpretive comment; fuller theoretical interpretation is reserved for the Discussion. The first plant image found in the novel is the daisy, which functions less as a symbol of hope and renewal than as a form of self-soothing, memory, and emotional refuge. It appears on the very opening page of the novel, as seen when Salama murmurs.

“Daisies. Daisies. Daisies. Sweet-smelling daises” (Katouh, 2022, p. 2)

This moment appears on the opening page of the novel, making its placement significant in establishing the emotional atmosphere of the story from the beginning. Before uttering the flower’s name, Salama is in a supermarket and unexpectedly finds herself recalling fragments of life before the destruction of Syria. That brief nostalgic moment is immediately confronted by the reality surrounding her: the place has become empty, damaged and stripped of the familiarity it once carried. Faced with this sudden contrast between memory and loss, Salama quietly murmurs the name of a flower.

This utterance does not function as a simple description of something physically present; instead, it reflects Salama's immediate emotional response to the devastation around her. The repeated naming of "daisy" becomes an act of self-soothing, suggesting an attempt to create psychological distance from the violence and emptiness she witnesses. Katouh introduces this pattern at the very beginning of the novel to show one of the main ways Salama copes with wartime reality: she turns to flowers as emotional anchors. Through repetition, the flower's name gradually loses its literal function and becomes a comforting ritual that allows her to momentarily return to a sense of safety and familiarity.

More than a floral image, the daisy functions as a symbolic medium through which Salama's emotions are expressed and preserved. As Munyangayo (2012) argues, symbolic forms often communicate meanings and feelings that cannot be conveyed directly. In this context, Salama's repeated naming of the daisy reflects her attempt to process the destruction surrounding her while reconnecting with memories of ordinary Syrian life before the war. The daisy therefore emerges as an early symbol of homeland, preserving Syria not as a physical place but as an emotional and remembered space that continues to exist through language, memory, and repeated acts of naming.

The second plant image found in the novel is jasmine, which among all the plant images is the one most directly connected to memory, homeland, and maternal belonging, as shown when Salama whispers,

"Jasmine. Jasmine. Jasmine... I whisper it over and over until I can inhale its fragrance, just like before, when Mama held me in both arms." (Katouh, 2022, p. 27)

Among all the plant images in the novel, jasmine is the one most directly connected to memory and homeland. This moment occurs when Salama repeatedly whispers the flower's name until she can imagine inhaling its fragrance again, returning mentally to a time before war and loss disrupted her life. The repetition becomes significant because Salama is not attempting to describe jasmine as a physical object but trying to recreate the experience associated with it. Her whispering functions as an act of sensory reconstruction through which memory becomes temporarily accessible again.

This distinction is important because the passage places emphasis not on visual remembrance but on smell. Salama does not simply remember jasmine; she attempts to smell it again. Research on autobiographical memory suggests that olfactory cues are especially effective in triggering emotionally vivid and personally meaningful recollections compared with other sensory stimuli (de Bruijn & Bender, 2018). Through this mechanism, Salama's repeated whispering of "jasmine" becomes a form of emotional return rather than ordinary recollection.

The final phrase of the passage deepens this process by connecting scent directly to human attachment: "just like before, when Mama held me in both arms." At this point, jasmine no longer functions only as a floral image but becomes attached to bodily memory, maternal comfort, and the feeling of being safe. The memory evoked is not limited to Salama's mother as an individual figure but expands into memories of everyday domestic life before destruction. Within this context, homeland is reconstructed not as a geographical territory but as an emotional space preserved through sensory memory. Jasmine therefore becomes a symbolic medium through which Salama temporarily restores closeness, warmth, and belonging that can no longer be physically accessed.

The third plant image found in the novel is the lemon tree, which first appears as a symbol of historical roots and collective identity before its meaning expands further in later parts of the narrative, as captured in the following passage.

"That lemon tree has been standing there since long ago. I used to climb it when I was little. I remember Baba once photographed me sitting on its branches." (Katouh, 2022, p. 207)

The lemon tree makes one of its earliest and most meaningful appearances in this scene, where Salama recalls that the tree had already been there long before the war and long before many of her own memories. She remembers climbing its branches as a child and being photographed there by her father. What the passage establishes immediately is not the tree's physical appearance but its duration and permanence. The lemon tree exists across different moments of Salama's life, connecting childhood, family relationships, and a time before violence reshaped everyday reality.

This temporal depth becomes central to the tree's symbolic function. Recent studies on place attachment suggest that emotional bonds with places are formed through accumulated experiences over time, where memory allows individuals to maintain continuity between past and present identities (Lomas, Ayodeji, & Brown, 2024). In this passage, the lemon tree functions as more than part of the landscape because Salama's memories repeatedly return to it. The tree becomes a stable point through which personal history remains accessible despite the disruptions caused by war.

Through this interaction between memory and place, the lemon tree becomes a site of belonging. Contemporary place attachment research argues that attachment emerges through emotional relationships with environments that contribute to identity formation and feelings of continuity. As a result, the lemon tree no longer functions simply as a tree in a garden but as evidence of ordinary life that once existed and endured. Homeland, in this image, is not represented as territory or national discourse but as the feeling of having grown somewhere, having been known there, and having once belonged there. Through its repeated appearances across the novel, the lemon tree accumulates symbolic meaning and becomes one of the strongest images through which homeland is preserved in personal memory and childhood belonging.

Later in the novel, the lemon tree reappears with an expanded meaning, no longer functioning only as a personal memory but as a symbol of resilience and revolutionary endurance, expressed in the line,

"Just like the lemon trees that have been growing here for centuries, spilled blood will not stop us." (Katouh, 2022, p. 254)

This passage marks the most significant transformation in the lemon tree's symbolic function across the novel. In its earlier representation discussed in the previous data, the lemon tree appeared as a personal image, a tree located in a particular garden and connected to Salama's childhood memories and her relationship with her father. In this later moment, however, the same image expands beyond personal experience and begins to operate as a collective and political statement.

This shift is arguably the clearest piece of textual evidence in the novel for the movement from individual to collective symbolism, and it deserves to be read as such: the shift from "that lemon tree" (singular and personal) to "the lemon trees" (plural and collective) changes the scale of meaning. The image no longer refers to one family's memory but becomes connected to a wider historical and communal experience. Studies of cultural memory argue that personal memories often gain broader symbolic meaning when they become integrated into shared narratives of identity and belonging (Assmann, 2011). In this context, the lemon trees come to represent not only individual attachment to place but continuity across generations and the persistence of collective existence.

The comparison constructed in the passage is precise: lemon trees have endured across time; therefore, spilled blood will not end the people. The symbolic force of the lemon tree lies not in dramatic strength but in endurance. Unlike images associated with sudden transformation or heroic action, the lemon tree suggests gradual growth, continuity, and sustained life. Research on place attachment emphasizes that long-term relationships with places become meaningful because they provide a sense of continuity and identity through changing historical conditions (Lomas et al., 2024); this literature is drawn on here only to support the textual observation already made, not to substitute for it. These qualities are projected onto the Syrian people in this moment of revolutionary crisis, where resistance is represented not as exceptional or theatrical but as something persistent and deeply rooted.

As a result, the lemon tree acquires a political meaning that exceeds its earlier function as childhood memory, extending beyond individual experience into collective identity and belonging. Through this transformation, homeland is no longer preserved only through remembrance but actively asserted and defended. The lemon tree therefore becomes a collective symbol through which continuity, endurance, and the persistence of Syrian identity are imagined.

The lemon tree reaches its broadest symbolic meaning in the novel's title line, where it comes to represent hope and the imaginary homeland, captured in the statement,

"It reminds me that as long as the lemon trees grow, hope will never die." (Katouh, 2022, p. 415)

This sentence, which also serves as the novel's title, represents the culmination of the symbolic development of the lemon tree across the narrative. To understand why this statement carries such emotional and symbolic force, it is necessary to consider how the image has evolved throughout the previous data. In its earlier representations, the lemon tree first appeared as a personal image associated with childhood, family memory, and attachment to a specific place. Later, its meaning expanded into a collective image connected to endurance and the persistence of Syrian identity. In this final moment, the symbol reaches its broadest meaning: the lemon tree becomes the medium through which hope itself is imagined and sustained.

The structure of the sentence is significant because hope is expressed conditionally: "as long as the lemon trees grow." Rather than presenting hope as abstract optimism or emotional reassurance, the statement grounds hope in continued growth and continuity. Studies of cultural memory suggest that symbols gain power not through isolated appearances but through repeated circulation across different moments until they accumulate broader collective meaning (Assmann, 2011). By the time this sentence appears, the lemon tree has already gathered associations with childhood, family, belonging, and collective endurance, allowing the final statement to function as a synthesis rather than a new symbolic introduction.

As a result, the sentence transforms homeland once again. Homeland is no longer represented only as remembered space or collective resistance but as an ongoing process of continuation. Contemporary place attachment studies suggest that emotional bonds with place contribute to identity by creating feelings of stability and endurance even when physical environments are disrupted. Through this final image, the novel proposes that homeland cannot be fully destroyed because it exists not only in territory but in the continued ability to remember, remain connected, and imagine growth. As long as the lemon trees grow, hope remains possible.

Environmental Imagery as a Symbol of Homeland

The first environmental image found in the novel is the dark sky and trapped moonlight, which functions as a symbol of siege and confinement. This image appears during the height of the siege, when the characters experience complete restriction and uncertainty, as captured in the following passage.

"The city painted black under a grey huddled sky. The moon's light is trapped behind the clotted clouds, just as we're trapped in Old Homs, unable to pass through." (Katouh, 2022, p. 155)

What makes this passage significant among the environmental images in the novel is the directness of its symbolism. Katouh does not leave the relationship between nature and human experience implicit but states it openly: the moonlight is trapped behind clouds "just as" the characters are trapped inside the old city of Homs and unable to leave. The phrase "just as" directly connects the condition of the environment with the condition of the people, making the landscape function as an extension of lived experience rather than a separate background.

This image appears during the height of the siege, when the characters experience complete restriction and uncertainty. Here, the darkness, gray sky, and blocked moonlight mirror the characters' sense of confinement and loss of freedom.

The image of trapped moonlight is especially important because light is commonly associated with visibility, possibility, and movement. By showing moonlight as unable to pass through the clouds, Katouh transforms an image usually connected with openness into one of limitation. The moonlight still exists but cannot reach the city, reflecting the characters' condition of remaining in their homeland while losing the freedom to live within it.

Together, these images construct homeland as a space whose meaning has changed. Homs remains home physically, yet emotionally it becomes a place of confinement rather than belonging. Through this environmental image, the novel represents homeland not as something destroyed but as something temporarily inaccessible under conditions of war.

The second environmental image found in the novel is the sunset after rain, which functions as a symbol of beauty, loss, and endurance, expressed in the line,

"The most beautiful sunsets are always the ones that come after a rain" (Katouh, 2022, p. 206)

This is the briefest passage among all the environmental data in the study, yet it conveys one of the novel's central ideas. The statement that the most beautiful sunsets always come after rain is presented as a general reflection rather than a description of a particular moment. The use of the word "always" suggests that Salama understands beauty and hardship as connected rather than opposite experiences.

In this passage, the sunset becomes a symbolic image through which loss is not presented as something that removes meaning but as something that changes how meaning is perceived. What becomes valuable is often recognized more deeply after it is threatened or disrupted.

This meaning is reinforced by the image discussed in the previous data. While the sunset suggests that loss makes homeland feel more valuable, the lemon tree represents continuity and remembered belonging. Together, these images show that homeland becomes most emotionally visible at the moment it begins to feel out of reach.

The third environmental image found in the novel is the Mediterranean Sea, which functions as a symbol of the threshold between homeland and diaspora, as described in the following passage.

"The Mediterranean is angry today. A storm brews under his restless waves. I see him rumble and twist within himself. I hear the remnants of those before me walking along the sand, throwing stones into his depth, trying to make sense of what has been happening for more than fifty years." (Katouh, 2022, p. 379)

This passage presents one of the broadest environmental images in the novel because it appears at the moment Salama is preparing to physically leave Syria. Unlike earlier environmental images that emerge through memory or reflection, the Mediterranean is experienced directly as part of the act of departure itself. This context gives the sea a wider symbolic meaning connected to movement, separation, and homeland.

The most visible feature of the passage is personification. The Mediterranean is described as "angry," it "brews," and it "rumbles and twists within himself." Through this repeated use of human qualities, the sea becomes more than a geographical setting. Environmental representation in literature often transforms landscapes into emotional spaces that reflect human experience and collective feeling. Here, the sea does not remain neutral but mirrors the emotional uncertainty and grief surrounding Salama's crossing.

The phrase "those before me" expands the meaning of the image. Salama does not see her departure as something that happens only to her. Instead, she understands herself as part of a longer history of people who have stood in the same place and faced similar loss. This moment connects her personal experience to a wider experience of displacement and migration, where leaving homeland is not only a physical movement but also an emotional experience shaped by memory and longing (Brah, 1996)

Through this image, the Mediterranean becomes more than a sea between Syria and Europe. It becomes a space of transition that separates home from exile while still carrying memories of those who left before. Homeland in this passage is not completely left behind; it continues to exist through memory and emotional attachment even after physical departure.

Across the six images discussed above, a consistent synthesis emerges, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Synthesis of Symbolic Development Across Plant and Environmental Imagery

Imagery	Initial Function	Developed Symbolism	Homeland Meaning
Daisy	Self-soothing/ emotional comfort	Memory/ psychological refuge	Remembered homeland
Jasmine	Scent/maternal memory	Safety and belonging	Sensory homeland
Lemon tree	Childhood memory	Endurance and hope	Collective/imagined homeland
Moonlight	Confinement	Siege	Inaccessible homeland
Sunset / rain Mediterranean	Beauty after hardship Departure	Loss and endurance Threshold / exile	Valued homeland Homeland-diaspora transition

Beyond thematic content, the textual evidence above is reinforced by recurring linguistic features that function as markers of symbolic construction rather than incidental style. Repetition is the most direct of these, seen in Salama's repeated naming of "daisy" and "jasmine," which performs the very act of symbolic anchoring the analysis describes. Personification appears most strongly in the depiction of the Mediterranean Sea as angry and restless, which transforms landscape into an emotional agent rather than a passive backdrop. Sensory imagery, particularly the olfactory focus of the jasmine passage, grounds memory in the body rather than in abstract recollection. The shift from singular to plural in "that lemon tree" to "the lemon trees" is a further linguistic marker, one that enacts the move from individual to collective meaning at the level of grammar itself, not only at the level of theme. Read together, these linguistic patterns provide textual evidence, independent of thematic interpretation alone, that the novel's imagery is organized as a deliberate symbolic system rather than incidental description.

4. Discussion

Plant Imagery as a Symbol of Homeland

The results show that plant imagery in *As Long As The Lemon Trees Grow* plays a larger role than simply describing the setting or creating atmosphere. Throughout the novel, flowers and lemon trees repeatedly appear in moments connected to fear, memory, separation, and hope. Because of this repetition, these natural elements gradually develop symbolic meanings and become one of the main ways homeland is represented in the narrative.

This pattern can be understood through Hall's (1997) theory of representation, which explains that meaning is not naturally attached to objects but is produced through the ways those objects are represented and understood. In Katouh's novel, flowers and trees do not become important because of their physical characteristics. Instead, they gain meaning through the emotions, memories, and experiences connected to them. Homeland therefore appears not as a fixed location but as something created and maintained through symbolic experiences.

The development of these images across the novel also reflects Frye's (1957) understanding of literary symbolism, in which repeated images become increasingly meaningful as they accumulate across a text. The Findings already traced this accumulation in detail for daisy, jasmine, and the lemon tree; what matters for the present argument is the direction that accumulation takes: homeland is built step by step, moving from intimate personal comfort toward a broader symbol of continuity and attachment to Syria, rather than being introduced all at once.

This reading also extends earlier studies of the novel rather than simply adding to them. Anganita and Latumeten's (2024) ecocritical reading and Machmuri et al.'s (2025) focus on trauma and romance both explain what the characters experience amid war and loss, and the present findings do not challenge those accounts; they extend them by showing how the novel gives symbolic shape to that experience through recurring imagery. Homeland is not only remembered by the characters but also reconstructed through repeated encounters with the natural world, a dimension neither of the earlier readings foregrounds.

This understanding connects closely with diaspora scholarship. Brah (1996) explains that homeland in diasporic experience is not always a place that people physically return to, but often something recreated through longing, memory, and emotional connection. A similar idea appears in Rushdie's (1991) concept of imaginary homeland, where displaced individuals rebuild their sense of home from fragments of memory rather than complete recovery of the past. In Katouh's novel, this reconstruction happens through images of

flowers, trees, and sensory experiences that allow Syria to remain emotionally present even when it becomes physically unreachable.

Environmental Imagery as a Symbol of Homeland

The results further show that environmental imagery contributes to the construction of homeland in a different way. While plant imagery emphasizes continuity and rootedness, environmental images often appear during moments of uncertainty, transition, and emotional conflict. Images such as dark skies, rain, blocked moonlight, and the Mediterranean Sea reflect changes in how homeland is experienced throughout the narrative.

From Hall's perspective (1997), these environmental images do more than describe physical conditions. They transform emotional experiences into symbolic forms. The environment becomes a way for the novel to express fear, loss, longing, and hesitation without always stating those emotions directly. Homeland is therefore represented not only as a physical place but also as an emotional condition shaped by changing circumstances.

This relationship between emotion and place can also be understood through Tuan's (1977) concept of topophilia, which describes the emotional bond people develop with particular places. In the novel, attachment to Syria continues even when the characters can no longer live there safely. Environmental images help maintain that attachment by allowing feelings of belonging to remain connected to the surrounding world.

The findings also reflect Rushdie's (1991) idea that homeland often becomes more visible after separation. Rather than disappearing, homeland becomes reconstructed through memory and imagination. Katouh presents this process through environmental moments that appear during departure, waiting, and uncertainty, showing that distance does not automatically weaken attachment.

This interpretation also relates to Safran's (1991) discussion of diaspora consciousness, where homeland continues to influence identity even after physical separation occurs. However, instead of presenting homeland mainly through political discourse or collective history, Katouh approaches it through personal and sensory experiences. Through this approach, homeland becomes something that remains emotionally alive rather than something that exists only as territory.

This process of symbolic reconstruction can be traced more precisely by drawing out the distinction between personal and collective cultural memory, and the lemon tree provides the clearest evidence for it. In its earliest appearances, the tree belongs to a private register of memory, tied to Salama's father and her own childhood; by the time it reappears in the revolutionary line about spilled blood, and again in the novel's title line, the same image has been absorbed into a shared narrative of endurance that no longer depends on any single character's biography. Place-attachment scholarship helps explain why this transition is possible: emotional bonds with places are formed through accumulated experiences over time, and long-term relationships with a place become meaningful precisely because they provide a sense of continuity and identity across changing historical conditions (Lomas et al., 2024).

Read this way, the lemon tree's repeated appearances in the Findings are not separate instances of the same observation but stages of a single process, in which personal recollection gradually accumulates into collective memory once it is repeated and taken up by a wider community. This movement, more than the imagery itself, is what allows the lemon tree to carry the weight of the novel's title, and it is also why separation from a meaningful place, as the sunset and Mediterranean images show elsewhere in the Findings,

can deepen rather than weaken attachment through memory and reflection (Lomas et al., 2024)

This progression also speaks to a broader tension the novel stages between physical destruction and symbolic endurance. War in the novel destroys physical space directly and visibly, seen in the ruined hospital, the besieged city, and the abandoned supermarket, yet the natural imagery examined here shows that memory operates on a different register that violence cannot reach in the same way. Homes may be flattened and streets may become unrecognizable, but a remembered lemon tree, a whispered flower name, or a half-remembered sunset persists precisely because it was never only physical to begin with; it was already symbolic. The novel's natural imagery therefore suggests that while war can destroy homeland as territory, it cannot as easily destroy homeland as a symbolic and emotional space sustained through memory.

A related tension worth naming explicitly is that between rootedness and mobility. Plant imagery in the novel, especially the lemon tree, is organized around staying: roots, continuity, and growth in a single place across time. Environmental imagery, especially the Mediterranean Sea, is organized around movement: departure, threshold, and the passage from homeland into diaspora. Read together, these two symbolic registers do not contradict each other so much as express two sides of the same experience of displacement, in which the desire to remain rooted persists even as movement becomes unavoidable.

Overall, the findings suggest that homeland in *As Long As The Lemon Trees Grow* is built through two connected symbolic patterns. Plant imagery preserves memory and continuity, while environmental imagery represents movement and emotional negotiation. Together, these images allow homeland to remain meaningful even when it can no longer be physically inhabited.

Taken together, these patterns support a sharper formulation of the study's main interpretive contribution than has been stated so far: Katouh's natural imagery does not merely represent a lost homeland; it narratively reconstructs homeland as a portable form of symbolic belonging, one that can be carried into displacement precisely because it was never reducible to territory alone. This is the theoretical synthesis this Discussion has been building toward, and it is this synthesis, rather than any single image on its own, that the Conclusion returns to.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how plant and environmental imagery in Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) functions as a symbolic strategy for constructing homeland within a Syrian diaspora context. Through close reading and textual analysis guided by Hall's (1997) theory of representation and Frye's (1957) theory of literary symbolism, the findings show that natural imagery in this novel operates as the primary medium through which homeland is remembered, reconstructed, and emotionally sustained across the narrative.

The analysis identified two interconnected symbolic patterns. Plant imagery, including the daisy, jasmine, and lemon tree, develops progressively from personal expressions of memory and emotional comfort toward broader symbols of collective endurance and imaginary homeland. Each image begins in an intimate register and accumulates richer meaning through repetition, reflecting Frye's account of how literary symbols grow in significance across a narrative.

Environmental imagery, including trapped moonlight, sunset after rain, and the Mediterranean Sea, contributes differently by reflecting the emotional conditions of siege, loss, and departure. Together, these two patterns show that homeland in the novel is not represented as a fixed geographical territory but as an ongoing symbolic construction

sustained through memory, sensory experience, and emotional attachment to the natural world. This reading extends existing studies of the novel, which have focused primarily on trauma, ecology, and romance, by demonstrating that its natural imagery functions as a coherent representational architecture in the sense Hall describes.

These findings are specific to Katouh's novel and the particular symbolic patterns her narrative develops. It would be premature to generalize this pattern to Syrian diaspora literature more broadly, or to claim that plant and environmental imagery universally functions this way in other diaspora fiction. Additionally, this study focuses exclusively on symbolic and representational dimensions, which means other significant aspects of the novel such as narrative structure, character psychology, and genre conventions remain outside its scope. Future studies may consider a comparative analysis between this novel and other contemporary Arabic diaspora works to examine whether this symbolic use of natural imagery reflects a broader tendency in Middle Eastern diaspora writing.

Researchers may also find it productive to combine ecocritical and representational frameworks, as doing so could reveal how ecological destruction and symbolic meaning-making interact within the same text. Since this study relies on the English translation of the novel, future research engaging with the original Arabic text may uncover additional layers of meaning that translation reshapes. Reader-response approaches that bring the perspectives of Syrian diaspora readers into conversation with literary analysis would also complement and enrich the findings presented here.

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