



# THE “ARAB-ORIENTAL” IN POST-9/11 AMERICA: A READING OF LAILA HALABY’S *ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND*

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## ABSTRACT

*The Orientalist psychology has been persistently shaped by an ideological demarcation between Westerners and Arab-Orientals; “the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things” (Said, p. 49). The Orientalist perspective has remained ingrained in the Western mind across the decades, persistently shaping the colonialist ideology in an era of mass migration. The latter decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a rapid upsurge in the migration of Arabs, a major part of whom settled in the United States. The continuous upsurge in the Arab migration and settlement was concurrent with the growing spur of racism, which forms the basis of the victimization of the Arab-American populace. In this regard, Steven Salaita (an eminent critic of Islamophobia and a spokesperson for the “Anti-Arab Racism” in the USA) observes, “The origin of American racism is a combination of European colonial values and interaction with Blacks and Indians” (p. 5). In the light of the above statement, this paper aims to study Laila Halaby’s novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) from an orientalist perspective, and locate the traces of Islamophobia that had victimized the Muslim immigrants in America after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.*

**KEYWORDS:** Orientalism, September 11 Attacks, Islamophobia, Anti-Arab Racism, Victimization.

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## INTRODUCTION:

In his 1972 essay on “The Arab World”, Harold W. Glidden, a retired member of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, United States Department of State, uncovers “the inner workings of Arab Behaviour” by addressing the nature of the conflict that remains inherent among the Arabs on the Israel issue. Glidden’s aim in sketching the characteristic traits of around a populace of 100 million Arabs over a period of 1,300 years lies explicitly in drawing an analogy between the Western world and the Arab world. “[If] Westerners consider peace to be high on the scale of values,” he writes, “in Arab tribal society (where Arab values originated), strife not peace, was the normal state of affairs because raiding was one of the main supports of the economy” (Glidden, 1972, p. 985). This demarcation between the Western world and the Arab world constitutes the “apogee of Orientalist confidence” (Said 49). It also contributes to the formation of an imaginary plenitude where “the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things” (Said, p. 49).

This Orientalist perspective has remained ingrained in the Western mind across the decades, persistently shaping the colonialist ideology in an era of mass migration. The latter decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a rapid upsurge in the migration of Arab, a major part of whom settled in the United

States. Scholars have noted that “[t]he majority of the Arabs immigrated to the north-eastern United States in two waves” (Abu-Ras and Abu-Bader, p. 220). The first wave consisted of immigrants who arrived in the U.S. between the 1870s and the 1920s. In that era of mass migration, more than 20 million Arab Muslims (mostly from Lebanon and Syria) had left their homeland due to the ongoing atrocities, political unrest, and war, and settled in different domain of the American territory. In the post-World War II timeframe, a more diverse group of Arab immigrants arrived in the United States. This group, like their varied ethnicities, were driven by varied interests and thus cherished a voluntary desire to settle in a new way of life, with the simultaneous reluctance to blend with the American way of life. Since the 1970s and beyond, a new wave of Arabs migrated to the United States mostly from Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, and Palestine.

In comparison with the other migrant groups, such as the Jews or the Italians, Arabs are “recent immigrants”, and therefore, are still undergoing the process of acculturation. This continuous upsurge in the Arab migration and settlement was concurrent with the growing spur of racism, which forms the basis of the victimization of the Arab-American populace. This paper aims to study Laila Halaby’s novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) from an orientalist perspective, and locate the traces of Islamophobia that had victimized the Muslim immigrants in America after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.



## LITERATURE REVIEW:

In his book *Anti-Arab Racism in the USA: Where It Comes from and What It Means for Politics Today* (2006) Stephen Salaita observes that the presence of the Arabs in America has been apparent since the second half of the nineteenth century. While discussing the prevalent racist attitude among the Americans, Salaita argues:

The origin of American racism is a combination of European colonial values and interaction with Blacks and Indians; the racism became uniquely American as the relationship among White settlers and slave owners and those they subjugated evolved from a seemingly one-sided display of power to a complicated (and usually discordant) discourse of oppression and resistance, capitalism and egalitarianism, stereotype and self-representation. (p.5-6).

With the increase of the overseas military and colonial projects, more people of diverse races, communities, and types started migrating to the United States and that made racism a more 'sophisticated' and contradictory way of thinking. Gradually, the acculturated immigrant groups started displaying racist attitudes to the newly migrated unacculturated groups. Moreover, for decades, the United States had some sort of political and social interests in the Arabian countries, which further complicated the position of Arabs in the American society and was constantly detested in visual and print media. Gradually, a certain kind of biased and stereotypical prejudice emerged in the minds of the general American public, which is more commonly known as 'Islamophobia', and paved way for a form of 'anti-Arab racism'. Anti-Arab racism manifested itself through acts of physical violence, ethnic discrimination, othering, dehumanization and marginalization and racial profiling of the Arabs. This phenomenon that had always been present in America took an intense form only after the September attacks of 2001. Salaita observes that "After 9/11, the Arab American community was suddenly thrust into the spotlight" (p. 77). He argues that the 9/11 incident did not "disrupt" anti-Arab racism; rather it had "polarized attitudes that had been in place years before the word *terrorism* entered common parlance" (p. 87). For people, already prone to racism and xenophobia before the 9/11 incident, found it a necessary instrument to ensue and justify a backlash against the Arab-American community. These anti-Arab sentiments created a

"...sort of xenophobic culture that prompted physical attacks – leading, in some cases, to murder – on Arab Americans and those perceived to be Arab American (Sikhs, South Asians, Central Asians, Hispanics) by Americans determined to preserve imperative patriotism" (Salaita, 2006, p.88).

Upon discussing the effects of the 9/11 incident on the Arabs and other minority communities in America, Salaita further observes that there has been a significant development in the literary field, in terms of the creation of a wide range of literature concerning those belonging to the religion of Islam. This has been instrumental in bringing them up from the status of marginality and invisibility to the mainstream American culture. It has also generated a renewed interest among the general American public to know about the lives of those who have "irrevocably altered American life" (Salaita, 2006, p. 75). This interest or acknowledgment of the Arabs would occur mostly in the form of ridicule or dismissal or racism. The assimilationist approaches from both sides, Arab and American, had been shattered after the incident which resulted in the splitting of the Arabian identity as they identified themselves both with the hijackers and the victims.

Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* represents the lives of a young Arab American couple, Jassim and Salwa Haddad who undergo the shattering of their 'American Dream' and suddenly discover themselves alienated in post-9/11 America. In her essay, "Moral Crusades: Race, Risk and Walt Whitman's Afterlives" (2012), Georgiana Banita undertakes a critical study of *Once in a Promised Land* and argues that Halaby has appropriately shown how, after the attacks of September 11, the Arab-Americans are perceived as 'social outsiders' and are categorized not only as 'second-rate citizens' but also as 'social hazards'.

In her thesis, *Reverse Orientalism: Laila Halaby's Once in a Promised Land* (2012), Amanda Lloyd argues that the novel "offers instructive insight into the struggles facing Arab Americans in post 9/11 America. Specifically, Halaby inverts the Western gaze upon the Arab world; in doing so, she represents an America that is conspiratorial and inundated with religious zealotry" (p. iv). Lloyd observes that, following Leslie Marmon Silko's technique in her path-breaking novel *Ceremony* (1977), "Halaby juxtaposes Arabic mythology and Western fairytales in order to reveal causes of the conflict between the Eastern and Western nations that, according to Halaby, are unapparent to many Americans and Arabs alike" (p. 3). Lloyd's argument is that, through the combination of Arabian folktales and the Arab American couple's struggle in the post 9/11 America, Halaby suggests that Eastern and western stories can exist peacefully when they are kept separately.

## AN ANALYSIS OF LAILA HALABY'S ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND:

Laila Halaby was born in Beirut to a Jordanian father and an American mother. She grew up mostly in Arizona, travelling widely and living for some time on the East and West Coasts, the Midwest, Jordan and Italy. She was awarded an undergraduate

degree in Italian and Arabic, followed by a double M.A. in Arabic Literature and Counseling. Halaby presently resides in Arizona, working in the post of outreach Counselor at the University of Arizona's College for Public Health. In her second novel, *Once in a Promised Land*, Halaby has realistically presented the condition of the Arab people in America in the aftermath of September 11. The central characters of the novel are Jassim and Salwa Haddad. As Halaby states in her foreword to the novel,

We really come to know them only after the World Trade Center buildings have been flattened by planes flown by Arabs, by Muslims. Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. (p. viii)

A Jordanian by origin, Jassim had developed a love for water in his childhood, when he found his uncle to discover an entire reservoir of water under his land and learned that "Water is what will decide things, not just for us but for every citizen of the world as well" (Halaby, p. 41). After graduating with a B.S. in Civil Engineering from the University of Jordan in Amman, Jassim migrated to Arizona, a southwestern region of the United States to pursue his academic career in Water Resource and completed a Ph.D. in 'Rainwater Harvesting'. He joined a firm that deals with water supply in different parts of the city of Tucson, returning to his country to look for a suitable job opportunity and returned marrying an Israeli girl, named Salwa, who was born in America, raised in Jordan.

The youngest child of an Israeli refugee family settled in Jordan, Salwa was born in America when their parents came to the country looking for a better life, but failed in several attempts and eventually went back to Jordan. Since her childhood, Salwa had always felt a certain kind of connection, and an unbearable attraction to visit the country of her birth, craving for the luxury, and comfort and privilege that it had in store for her. Emotionally, she got involved with her neighbour's son and her college friend Hassan and was entitled to marry him until she came in contact with Dr. Jassim Haddad, a hydrologist from America, who had visited her University to deliver a lecture on Water and its necessity. Jassim felt a certain kind of attraction towards her because in her "he saw home, which made her both more precious and a source of resentment", and proposed her to marry him, which she accepted as she found in him a man who would take her to her long-desired land. Therefore, she readily accepted the marriage proposal, (leaving her boyfriend Hassan heartbroken) and flew off to Arizona. There, she found employment for herself as a banker and a real estate agent. Jassim and Salwa were the wealthy immigrants with a villa at the foothills and a Mercedes; they had achieved their 'American Dream'.

Myth plays an important role in diasporic fiction. In his essay "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return"(1991), William Safran argues that being dispersed from their original homeland, members of the diasporic community will retain "collective memory, vision and myth" about their homeland, which made them feel closer to their cultural roots. In *Once in a Promised Land*, Laila Halaby has intertwined the Arabian folktale and myths with the narrative of Arab existence in America. The novel begins with the intonation of a fairy tale: "They say there was or there wasn't in older times a story as old as life, as young as this moment, a story that is yours and is mine" (Halaby, p.VII). This indicates the universal nature of the narrative, concerning existence, struggle, and survival.

The narrative begins on a Tuesday morning in Arizona, the southwestern state of United States, with Jassim heading towards the fitness bar to swim for half an hour and enjoy the last moments of peace, balance and stability and Salwa enjoying her last early morning sleep, which they would not get in the forthcoming months, because within an hour or so the country would be devastated by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In their essay on "The Impact of the September 11, 2001, Attacks on the Well-Being of Arab Americans in New York City", Wahida Abu-Ras and Soleman H. Abu-Bader has observed that

...due to the nationality of the 9/11 perpetrators, the first reaction of the majority of Americans was to blame Muslim and Arab citizens for the attack. As a result, the Arab American community felt itself in the "enemy camp" and automatically excluded from the larger American grieving process (p. 226).

Within a few moments of the tragedy, Jassim and Salwa found that the world they inhabited had changed significantly. The terrorist attacks had churned up a patriotic feeling in the mind of the general American public, which they expressed through certain symbols and gestures. In her book *Behind the Backlash*, Lori peek states that, "For many Americans, displaying such symbols as the American flag reaffirmed their loyalty to the nation and allowed them to show their solidarity with others" (Halaby, p. 68). While driving home from her bank, Salwa could find the American national flag everywhere, sprouting through the car windows, signaling her "to leave". "Her eyes counted four American flags, three in stores and on flying from a car... Seven flags in less than a mile houses"(Halaby, p.56-57). Often, such patriotic elements are displayed "to harm and to isolate Muslims" (Peek, p. 68). Salwa felt alienated in a country that had given her life, wealth, comfort and luxury and had suddenly turned hostile towards the people of her race. Turning on the radio channel, she heard the raging voice

of a patriot, speaking against the Arab terrorists and the Muslims and the possibility of a further attack.

Lori Peek argues, "Those who were employed in service sector had to contend with a sharp post-9/11 rise in discrimination from co-workers and customers"(p. 82). Once in her bank, Salwa was visited by a customer, a fat, old woman, seeking information about her personal bank account. Observing Salwa's exotic look and different skin colour, she started her enquiry about her origin and background. Learning that Salwa was originally a Palestinian, born in America and raised in Jordan, she became suspicious and refused to deal with any personal matters with her because of her Islamic identity.

The unnamed woman still looked at her with a stony face and thinking eyes. "I think I'd like to work with someone else. I think I'd feel more comfortable working with someone I can understand better"...I don't want to do anything with you people (Halaby,p.114).

While Salwa had to endure humiliation and would get more isolated from her colleagues, Jassim lost his mental stability and balance, after the attacks. The thoughts of the attacks, the images of the shattering of the Towers, "human leaping from impossible heights, plumes of smoke filling the air and then charging down the narrow streets" would haunt him throughout the days and nights. He could no longer concentrate on his work; neither could he find any relaxation in swimming which previously used to help him to regain mental stability and balance. "His body immersed in water again and moving smoothly, he saw the falling-down-an elevator-chute style in which the two towers had collapsed" (Halaby, p.20).

The 9/11 attacks had also generated a certain amount of fear and panic in the mind of the general American public. In the days after the attacks, Jassim's days and working hours were preoccupied with the emergency calls from the panic-stricken people, who anticipated bombs and poison in the supplied water.

After the attacks, Muslim people residing in the United States became subjects of suspicion and fear. Upon his venture to a shopping mall with his wife Salwa, Jassim discovered a woman following him, with walky-talky on her shoulders. When enquired about her strange gesture, the woman replied that she had been called by somebody from the mall for maintaining the security of the place. It had been revealed that the salesgirls of a store had informed the security to keep a watch over Jassim because his looks were threatening and he was staring at a motorcycle for a long time, which they felt weird. One of the salesgirls admitted that since her uncle's death in one of the Twin Towers, she had been traumatized and feared that somebody would blow up the mall.

Meanwhile, Salwa felt a yearning for a child who would bridge the gap between Jassim and her. She remembered a folktale that she had heard from her grandmother about a woman "who couldn't get pregnant. Years passed, and her yearning for a baby grew and grew", until she was offered a 'pregnancy apple' by a fruit seller, consumed half of it (as the other half was consumed by her husband), conceived and gave birth to a deformed child who won the praise of everybody through his clever deeds in his childhood. Salwa felt that she was the mythical woman yearning for a child. She stopped taking contraceptive pills (without informing her husband) to let the inevitable thing happen and eventually conceived. But her fate differed from that of the woman, as her fetus got drained away with blood before taking the shape of a baby.

The news of the terrorist attacks, the distress of the people of his religion and his wife's conception and miscarriage disturbed Jassim more, and he could no longer concentrate on a particular thing. In such a mental state, while driving home from the fitness bar, he hit a teenage boy, who accidentally came in front of his car, and died at that instant. He became subject to numerous enquiries by the police and detective forces, returning home in a terrible state. He felt his life changed completely after the series of events. He felt as if he "was the dead elephant, a giant pinned to his bed by heavy thoughts" (Halaby, p.148). He couldn't open his mind, nor could he share his thoughts with his wife in the fear that she would be horrified and blame him for his lack of responsibility and control over his car. He tried every means to return back to his normal routine, but couldn't find the energy to perform the daily chores. Overburdened with exhaustion, fatigue and guilt, Jassim found that "His everyday, automatic preparations were now slow and conscious; washing his face, looking in the mirror at the same face, the same eyebrows, the same self who had killed a boy" (Halaby, p.149). He had to endure every form of assault. While having lunch with his boss Marcus, he became an object of the stare of an American man, who told him to "Go home".

In a desperate attempt to regain his lost balance, Jassim headed towards another direction, much different from his known path, and started visiting Denny's café instead of going to the fitness bar. There he got acquainted with a waitress named Penny, a woman in her late thirties, and developed a strong physical desire for her. "The control that had been tugged out of his hands in the form of Evan and Salwa was being replaced and returned in the form of Penny and pure desire" (Halaby, p.157). He became distanced from his wife whom he couldn't explain his situation and who didn't make any move to understand him.

Jassim went through his days in America bulldozer style, an Arab in a Mercedes, oblivious of the sizzling around him, the words tossed his way, the puddles of



fear and loathing he skirted and stepped through. After the accident, his diorama sufficiently shaken, he began to see, slowed down, and looked at those looking back. And for the first time he felt unsettled in his beloved America, vaguely longed for home, where he could nestle in the safe, predictable bosom of other Arabs (Halaby, p.165).

On the other hand, due to the turmoil of the outer world, detachment from her husband and grief of losing a child, Salwa was hovered by the emptiness which she tried to fill somehow. She became attracted to his colleague, Jake who was much younger in age, a drug addict and supplier. The attacks of September 11 created a renewed interest in the religion of Islam and the things Islamic. An American youth Jake started taking Arabic classes in a University to know the culture and language that had roles to play in altering the fate of his country. He felt attracted to Salwa because she was a "gorgeous Arab", older in age and "foreign", and was interested only in having sexual liaison with her. Salwa, unaware of his original intentions, became affected by his progresses, and would feel better in his presence as that would take her away from the turbulence of the outer world and the conjugal life.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, representatives from the FBI and other official agencies started visiting mosques, educational and employment sectors and houses to conduct an interview with some thousands of Middle Eastern and South Asian men who were legally residing in the United States as students, employees and visitors. At the time of the interview, most of the people were asked about "their political and religious beliefs, whether they sympathized with the 9/11 terrorists, whether they had any scientific or weapons training, and where they had travelled in the past"(Peek, p. 34).Jassim became a target of the Federal Bureau Investigation (FBI) who would visit his office to enquire about his behavioral practices, political and religious views, response and reactions to the 9/11 incident and corresponding 'War on Terror'. He was informed that the FBI had decided to carry forward the investigation as some of his office colleagues had filed a complaint against him. Much to his astonishment he learned that he had become suspicious to some of his office colleagues, about his office colleagues Corey, Lisa and Bella who were "unthinkingly flag-waving patriotic" and who would "stand up for a war and ignore human rights in the name of peace and freedom" (p. 225).Jassim learned about the condition of his fellow-men in the United States,

...about the scores of Arabs and Pakistanis and other Muslims who [had] been arrested on baseless allegations, who [were] being held...and [were] not allowed contact with their families, and how they [might] be deported because of visa violations (Halaby, p.226).

These heinous measures were adopted to make people (especially the Muslim and non-Christians) "realize the extent [the] government [would] go to for the sake of justifying what they see as revenge" (Halaby, p.226). The undesired happenings and the condition of his fellowmen made Jassim more restless, "His thoughts were muddled; he could not concentrate or see straight. The week ahead seemed impossibly long, and his fortitude had withered away" (Halaby, p.227).Jassim dialed the number that the FBI agent had left in his office desk and was asked to meet them for lunch in a restaurant. Upon reaching the place in the allotted time, Jassim was greeted by two FBI agents, Noelle James and Adam Fletcher, who started their enquiry by referring to the accident and the death of the teenage boy Evan Parker. It turned out that the boy was anti-Islamic, was specifically hateful of the Arabs and carried a 'Terrorist Hunting License'. Thus it made Jassim's condition more critical as the FBI agents perceived the accident and the death of the boy as a carefully planned murder, and that Jassim had killed him because of his racist attitude. Moreover, he was enquired about his reaction to the September 11 attacks, to which he replied that he "was shocked, saddened, unsettled. Probably much the same as most people in this country. It was so unexpected"(Halaby, p. 231). He was asked questions about his religious views and practices and was accused of poisoning the water supply of the city. Jassim couldn't help blurting himself out:

I am a scientist. I work to make water safe and available. I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab. Yes, I have access to the city's water supply, but I have no desire to abuse it. The mere fact that I am an Arab should not add suspicion to the matter...I have spent my entire life trying to find ways to make water safe and accessible for everyone. Just because I am an Arab, because I was raised a Muslim, you want to believe that I am capable of doing evil. It is sometimes best to look within before casting such a broad net(Halaby, p.232).

Further, he was asked about his wife's views on the September 11 attacks, her office colleagues and her recent behavioral changes. He was surprised to learn that Salwa had sent a lump sum amount of fourteen thousand dollars to her home in Jordan on the day after the tragedy. From the conversation, Jassim learned that Salwa's phone had been tapped and she was constantly watched by the FBI agents. He showed his reluctance to continue the conversation with the agents, and before they would respond, he was out of the restaurant. On his way back to the office, Jassim was overburdened by thoughts:

Jassim wondered vaguely if the distant attitude on the part of the city workers and the office girls was American racism. It seemed like a giant misunderstanding. Being hated outwardly would have been so much easier that this

dancing around people's words and complaints and trying to figure out what they really meant. It made him shaky and unsettled. Unbalanced. An fairly weighted scale. A globe tripped on its axis. An axis unable to rebalance. An axis of evil. He smiled to himself at this thought. Ludicrous (Halaby, p.234).

He couldn't accept the fact that simply because he was an Arab would mean that he was against America and its people. He wanted to scream and tell that like others, he was also a citizen of this country, one who could understand it well, "pay taxes to [the] government and "had a right to be here" (Halaby,p.234). The fact that Salwa had sent a huge amount of fourteen thousand dollars to her home in Jordan, on the very next day of the terrorist attacks, and that she was receiving calls of his childhood acquaintance and ex-boyfriend Hassan, had made Jassim more distressed.

Interrupting peace, jabbing at the evenness, was at the very odd picture he had wished he hadn't seen: Salwa sending \$ 14,000 to Jordan on September 12. (Unfortunate timing.) And worse, the even odder snap of Hassan Shaheed resurfacing, calling Salwa. Repeatedly. And the humiliation of hearing it first from FBI agents (Halaby,p.235).

The September 11 attacks had not only made the Muslim American community alienated and traumatized but on a personal level, it had traumatized and alienated the individuals. The distance between Jassim and Salwa became more intense, and though living in the same house, they lived like two separate islands. Salwa got involved in a sexual relationship with Jake, who was a drug addict and would tell nasty stories about their sexual intercourse to his colleagues the next day. Salwa felt lost in America with so many things happening around her and opened her mind up to her Arabian friend Randa, who suggested her to take a break and visit her country for some time and settle the things out. Jassim, on the other hand, developed a friendly yet lustful relationship with Penny, who would help him to deal with the dilemma, guilt and frustration.

Jassim's different attitude over the past few weeks, arriving late and leaving the office early, made him doubtful to his boss Marcus, who would sense that something was wrong with Jassim but he was not opening his mind to the person who had known him over the past fifteen years. Meanwhile, Marcus learned about the accident and the death of Evan Parker and received continuous calls from the clients who expressed their reluctance to work with an Arab-Muslim, over such a sensitive issue such as water. This prompted Marcus to take the ultimate decision to save the reputation of his firm. Jassim was called and explained the current situation. Marcus told,

Look, Jassim, this FBI investigation is scaring off our business. They have talked to every one of the clients you work with, and every one has called me to ask for an explanation. No one will work with you, but it's not just because of the FBI. They say there have been inconsistencies – leaving early, coming in late. Odd behavior... Bottom line, we're going to lose the business if I don't make an act of good faith to the people we do business with. (Halaby, p. 296-297).

Therefore, as an "act of good faith" on Marcus's part, Jassim was fired from the firm where he had given fifteen years of his life. The suspicion grew so acute that Jassim was not allowed to take his personal belongings home, not even his files, which he was told, would be sent to his home later. Back home at an unusually early hour, fired from his job, Jassim looked back at his life:

He had come to America a simple, focused man who wanted to expand his knowledge so that he could improve life for others. He had stayed in America to bide his time until he could take his bag of learning home and apply it, until home was ready for him. Until he was ready... In more than a decade of good citizenship, he had never for a minute imagined that his successes would be crossed out by a government censor's permanent marker, that his mission would be absorbed by his nationality, or that Homeland Security would have anything to do with him. Things like this aren't supposed to happen in America. Americans are pure, simple people, their culture governed by a few basic tenets, not complicated conspiracy theories(Halaby, p.298-299).

Jassim's expectation of receiving support from his wife got shattered as she informed him of his decision to take a homeward journey within a few days. He turned to Penny to find solace, asking her to visit the Botanical Garden with him. Salwa occupied herself with the last minute shopping and went to Jake's flat to bid him goodbye. Finding Jake in an abnormal state, Salwa realised that he had been under the spell of a drug, and while hastening to leave his flat, she was hit by him on her face, head and all over the body by a portrait that she had admired so long. The portrait contained a Japanese myth was about "a young woman who searched for happiness, and each time she thinks she has found it, it escapes her" (Halaby, p. 209). In her search for happiness, the woman lost her own beauty "which was one of the things that brought her happiness in the first place, but she didn't realize it until after she lost it" (Halaby, p.209).Salwa's condition was similar to the mythical Japanese woman in the portrait; throughout her life, she searched for happiness and lost her beauty in search of it as she was hit and scratched in her face, ironically with the same portrait

which represented a woman's loss of beauty. The injuries left her disfigured and unconscious. She was rescued by some Mexican workers, who were involved in gardening activities on the lawn and was admitted to the hospital.

The narrative ended with a folktale concerning a peasant girl who was born to refugee parents in a faraway land "where fathers – and often mothers too – labored so that their children could change their fates"(Halaby p. 331). The beauty of the "moon-faced child" attracted the *ghula* who became highly jealous and stitched her invisible threads all over the child's body, so that she could pull the child according to her wish. With time, the child grew into a beautiful woman, who fell in love with a young man named Hassan, much to the fury of the *ghula*. The *ghula* was visited by a nightingale that would please her with his sweet voice. When the *ghula* thought that the girl had ripped enough to make a delicious feast, she pulled her away "from her familiar world, gently turning the skein a bit more each day"(Halaby p. 332). The nightingale realized the *ghula's* original intention and tried to warn the girl, but she ignored his warnings. Years passed, the girl "grew plumper but sadder, longing for her home and yet somehow unable to return". One day, Hassan visited the *ghula's* palace in search of his beloved and tried to save her from the dangerous *ghula*. In his attempt to kill the witch, he hit his beloved with a knife, expressed his apology, and fled from the place, leaving her unconscious and disfigured. The nightingale then transformed into 'an ordinary man' came to her rescue, "lifted the unconscious and damaged maiden and carried her home across land and sea, hoping that with proper care she would recover from her wounds" (Halaby,p.335).

The tale is metaphorical; the peasant girl is actually Salwa, America is the *ghula* that has tied several invisible threads in her body after her birth, and thus she felt a certain kind of pull from the land of her birth. While talking about the condition of people like Salwa, Halaby observes that people who belong to a different country by origin, culture and ethnicity, but are born on a foreign ground (especially in America) but are deported to their own land, are entangled with numerable threads. These people feel the pull of the threads, and carry an unsurmountable urge to return back to their birthplace. In such a critical physical and mental state, the best thing to do is to pull out the threads off and be contented with their normal life. But this process is very painful and often traumatic. There are people who would find out the origin where the threads are stitched and alter them according to their choice. There are also people, the acrobats, who can "manage their threads quite well". Salwa, however, belonged to neither of the categories, and thus, would be haunted by an unbearable attraction towards America, and an imperishable desire to revisit the country.

Only the America that pulled her was not the America of her birth, it was the exported America of Disneyland and hamburgers, Hollywood and the Marlboro man, and therefore impossible to find. Once in America, Salwa still searched and tripped and bought smaller and sexier pajamas in the hope that she would one day wake up in that Promised Land(Halaby, p. 49).

Her notion of America as a "Promised Land" alters significantly after the 9/11 attacks; she found that her dream has been shattered. She does not feel America be her own country anymore, at the same time, nor can she return to her homeland overcoming the lure of wealth and comfort that she has become used to. Jassim is the mythical nightingale who tries to warn her about the danger, but she has always ignored his warnings. After the terrible injury that leaves her disfigured and barely conscious, it is Jassim, the "ordinary-looking man," whom she had ignored all the while, who takes her away to her own place, to the safe environment of her home.

## CONCLUSION:

In her essay "The Face of the Enemy: Arab American Writing Post-9/11", Maha El Said argues that the terrorist attacks of September 11 that "brought down the World Trade Center" have rejuvenated the orientalist outlook and have re-constructed a division between "Self" and "Other", "good" or "evil", "with us" or "against us".

In the midst of this new schism, Arab-Americans, who are a *mélange* of Arab and American, become trapped in an attempt to redefine their identity, and reconstruct a hybridity that seems impossible in a world that is divided into 'we' and 'them'(p. 3).

In this divided world, Jassim and Salwa found them lost, and traverse through wrong paths that have done no good other than enhancing their bitter experiences, and have ultimately compelled them to return to their original homeland. The novel does not end in the manner of a typical fairy tale, with the hero-heroines living "happily ever after", because "Happily ever after happens only in American fairy tales", and it is not a fairy tale but a realistic tale of Arab people's experiences, dilemma and crisis in America post-9/11(Halaby, p. 335).

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