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Cultural Displacement and Arab American Identity: Analysing *Once in a Promised Land* in the Post-9/11 Era

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Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* examines the intricacies of Arab American identity in the aftermath of the events of 9/11. Focusing on Jassim and Salwa Haddad, a Jordanian couple in Arizona, the novel critiques systemic biases, stereotypes, and cultural alienation Arab Americans face during this fraught period. Using critical frameworks from Edward Said, Nadine Naber, and Evelyn Alsultany, this analysis explores themes of cultural displacement, identity, and the disintegration of the American Dream. Halaby highlights the emotional toll of societal prejudice, showing how institutional scrutiny and xenophobia undermine the characters' personal and professional lives. Jassim and Salwa's unravelling reveals the fragile nature of belonging and the limitations of material success in countering cultural estrangement. The novel critiques the binaries of "us" versus "them," exposing how post-9/11 rhetoric perpetuates marginalization. Halaby's work calls for confronting systemic prejudice and reimagining inclusion in a polarized America. By intertwining personal narratives with broader socio-political contexts, *Once in a Promised Land* offers a compelling critique of the forces that marginalize Arab Americans and a poignant exploration of identity and resilience in a post-9/11 world. This study situates Halaby's narrative within post-9/11 literature, emphasizing its relevance in understanding cultural alienation and systemic inequality.

Keywords: American Dream, Arab American identity, Cultural displacement, Post-9/11 era, Representation.

Introduction

The events of September 11, 2001, catalysed a profound shift in the United States' socio-political climate, significantly impacting Arab Americans' lives. This period saw an escalation in surveillance, scrutiny, and systemic discrimination against Arab communities, fostering an environment rife with racial prejudice and cultural alienation. Within this challenging context, Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) emerges as a critical narrative exploring the intricate dynamics of cultural displacement and identity among Arab Americans. Through the lens of Jassim and Salwa Haddad, a Jordanian couple residing in Arizona, the novel delves into the emotional and societal upheavals they face in post-9/11 America. Their story is a poignant exploration of identity, belonging, and the fracturing of the American Dream, making it a vital subject for analysing the Arab American experience during this tumultuous period.

This study aims to dissect how *Once in a Promised Land* navigates the themes of cultural displacement and identity amidst the broader socio-political aftermath of 9/11. By situating the novel within the landscape of post-9/11 literature and trauma studies, the analysis leverages critical frameworks to interrogate how Halaby's narrative intersects with the lived realities of Arab Americans. It engages with the work of scholars such as Nadine Naber and Evelyn Alsultany, whose insights into the transformation of Arab American identity post-9/11 provide a backdrop for examining the systemic biases and stereotypes Halaby's characters encounter. The novel's critique of the simplified binary of "Us" vs "Them" and its engagement with themes of racial capitalism and orientalism offers a nuanced critique of the American socio-political context. Through Halaby's narrative, this study aims to shed light on the pressing issues of representation, belonging, and the struggle against systemic prejudice that Arab Americans continue to navigate.

Arab American Identity in Post-9/11 Narratives: Contextualizing *Once in a Promised Land*

Scholars such as Naber and Alsultany provide valuable insights into the formation and transformation of Arab American identity in the wake of 9/11. Naber emphasises that these events intensified a pre-existing marginalisation of Arab and Muslim communities, further entrenching stereotypes and cultural biases that had already been prevalent in American society (Naber, 2012). Alsultany, in *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (2012), critiques the limited and often harmful portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in mainstream media and highlights how post-9/11 media narratives frequently depicted Arabs and Muslims as perpetual outsiders. This framing significantly shaped public perceptions and deepened social divisions.

Naber's *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (2012) explores the cultural negotiations that Arab Americans engage in as they navigate the intensified racialisation and scrutiny following 9/11. She delves into the ways Arab Americans have had to balance their cultural identities while responding to the heightened stigmatisation and systemic discrimination exacerbated by the political climate. This negotiation often includes reimagining personal and collective identities to counteract the dominant stereotypes that cast Arabs and Muslims as threats to national security.

Scholars such as Jack Shaheen have extensively analysed the media's role in perpetuating these harmful stereotypes. His work *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001) offers a critical examination of Hollywood's long history of portraying Arabs in negative, often villainous roles. Shaheen's analysis underscores how these portrayals reinforce societal biases, contributing to a cultural environment where Arab Americans are persistently othered. The convergence of media narratives, political rhetoric, and public policy in the post-9/11 era created a landscape that not only marginalised Arab Americans but also shaped the ways they were perceived and treated by the broader American public.

Together, these scholarly contributions illuminate the complexities of Arab American identity in a post-9/11 context. They reveal how cultural, political, and media-driven forces intersect to shape public perceptions and individual experiences. By addressing the pervasive stereotypes and systemic challenges faced by Arab Americans, these works underscore the importance of critically examining the narratives that define and influence marginalised communities in times of national crisis.

The 'Us vs. Them' Binary in Halaby's Narrative: Unpacking Cultural Divisions

The binary of "us" versus "them" is a recurring theme in 9/11 literature, and Arab and Muslim identities are framed as antithetical to Western values (Kahf, 2006). Such binaries are perpetuated not only by overtly hostile portrayals but also by ostensibly sympathetic ones that still position Arabs and Muslims as "others" requiring assimilation or redemption (Alsultany, 2012). Building on this contextual foundation, Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* provides a literary lens to examine the lived experiences of Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11. Halaby's narrative delves into these societal dynamics and psychological and emotional tolls, offering a poignant critique of the divisive "us versus them" rhetoric that emerged in the post-9/11 era. Through the experiences of Jassim and Salwa, Halaby illustrates how these simplistic categorisations perpetuate societal divisions and inflict profound psychological and social harm.

Samira Mehta's analysis of *Muslims in American Popular Culture* (2018) highlights how post-9/11 narratives often position Muslims as either "good" (assimilated and apolitical) or "bad" (radicalised and resistant). This binary is evident in Halaby's portrayal of Jassim's interactions with the FBI, where his attempts to present himself as a law-abiding scientist are overshadowed by institutional suspicion. Mehta's framework underscores how *Once in a Promised Land* critiques the reductive categories imposed on Arab Americans.

Naber's concept of "cultural citizenship", which refers to how marginalised communities negotiate their identity and rights within a nation, aligns with the experiences of Jassim and Salwa, who struggle to assert their place in American society while grappling with their

Arab identity. Salwa's longing for Jordan and her alienation in the U.S. illustrate how cultural citizenship is denied to Arab Americans, forcing them into a perpetual state of liminality. Alsultany's analysis of the "simplified complex representations" of Arabs, where token positive portrayals are juxtaposed with overarching stereotypes of terrorism, mirrors the media-driven biases Halaby critiques in *Once in a Promised Land.* For instance, Jassim's characterisation as a threat to the city's water supply reflects the pervasive media narrative that conflates Arab identity with danger, underscoring Alsultany's observations.

Institutionalised Prejudice: Dissecting Societal and Institutional Bias in Post-9/11 America

The novel captures the pervasive suspicion and scrutiny faced by Arab Americans in the wake of 9/11. It demonstrates how racial stereotypes distort the lived experiences of Arab Americans, reducing individuals to one-dimensional representations that fuel prejudice and discrimination. Jassim and Salwa's experiences exemplify the damaging effects of institutional and interpersonal biases, exposing the profound psychological and social toll such prejudices take on individuals and communities. These dynamics infiltrate professional, personal, and societal interactions, creating a climate of fear, alienation, and diminished humanity.

Jassim's experiences as a hydrologist reflect the profound impact of institutional suspicion on Arab Americans. Despite his professional accomplishments and adherence to the law, he becomes a target of post-9/11 paranoia when his access to the city's water system raises unfounded concerns. The FBI scrutinises Jassim's personal and professional life, subjecting him to invasive questioning and surveillance. His frustration at this treatment is encapsulated in his poignant response to Agent Fletcher:

"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 fact that I am an Arab should not add suspicion to the matter" (Halaby, 2007, p. 232).

Jassim's plea highlights the irrationality and injustice of equating his Arab identity with a potential threat. His treatment exemplifies the broader post-9/11 reality, where Arab Americans are frequently viewed through a lens of suspicion, regardless of their actions or contributions. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" from *The Location of Culture* (1994) deepens the analysis of Jassim's identity crisis during the FBI investigation. The "unhomely" captures Jassim's dislocation as he is framed not as a contributing scientist but as a potential saboteur. Alsultany's insights into how post-9/11 surveillance disproportionately targeted Arab and Muslim communities further contextualise the investigation, illustrating how institutional practices reflect broader societal biases.

While Salwa's experiences of prejudice are less overtly institutional, they are no less impactful. Her interactions at the bank where she works reveal the deep-seated biases that Arab Americans face in their daily lives. A particularly jarring moment occurs when a customer, learning that Salwa is Palestinian, accuses her of potential theft and terrorism: "What does that mean? What do you mean that you are Palestinian from Jordan? Does it mean you will steal my money and blow up my world?" (Halaby, 2007, p. 113).

This encounter underscores how suspicion infiltrates mundane interactions, reducing Salwa's identity to harmful stereotypes. Such moments erode her dignity and humanity, forcing her to navigate a world that refuses to see her as anything other than an "other." For Salwa, alienation manifests through her internal conflict and longing for cultural connection. Her miscarriage becomes a powerful metaphor for the depletion of hope and stability, representing the emotional toll of cultural displacement and societal rejection. Her abusive relationship with Jake, laden with racial slurs and violent outbursts, highlights how even personal relationships are shaped by the prejudices of a post-9/11 world. Together, Jassim and Salwa's experiences encapsulate the erosion of the American Dream for many Arab Americans, who find themselves excluded from the ideals of acceptance and prosperity.

Jassim's professional challenges reflect the dynamics of racialised labour outlined by Naber (2012). The novel illustrates how Arab Americans are excluded from cultural citizenship despite their

professional contributions. Jassim's dismissal mirrors Peter Boxall's (2009) observations on how post-9/11 literature critiques the fragility of immigrant success in a racially charged environment. Boxall examines how novels about terrorism grapple with themes of fear, identity, and societal rupture—insights that resonate deeply with Halaby's portrayal of Jassim and Salwa Haddad. Through Jassim's experiences, Halaby underscores how the illusion of stability and integration for immigrants can be swiftly dismantled in a climate of heightened suspicion and racial prejudice. This aligns with Boxall's analysis of the precariousness faced by immigrant characters in post-9/11 narratives, where societal ruptures expose the vulnerability of those marginalised by dominant cultural narratives.

The 9/11 attacks catalysed the fracturing of Jassim and Salwa's identities. The societal hostility and suspicion they face lead them to question their place in America and their connection to their Jordanian heritage. Their journey reflects the broader experiences of many immigrants, attempting to reconcile their identities with the cultural and societal narratives imposed upon them. Characters such as Amber, who reports Jassim to authorities based solely on his appearance, and Evan, who harbours violent anti-Arab sentiments, exemplify the overt prejudices that Arab Americans face. Even ostensibly sympathetic characters like Penny reveal unconscious biases, reflecting the complexities of prejudice in American society.

Fractured Dreams: Arab Americans and the Elusive American Dream

Halaby's work explores the collapse of the American Dream for Jassim and Salwa, chronicling their journey from hopeful immigrants to disillusioned outsiders navigating the harsh realities of post-9/11 America. Initially embodying the archetype of the ambitious immigrant couple, Jassim and Salwa aspire to stability, prosperity, and belonging in what they perceive as a "Promised Land." However, the convergence of systemic prejudice, xenophobia, and socio-economic inequities gradually erodes their aspirations, leaving them alienated and disenchanted. Halaby uses their story to critique the fragility of the American Dream, particularly for Arab Americans, whose identities position them as perpetual outsiders in a nation increasingly defined by fear and suspicion.

Jassim and Salwa's lives in the United States begin with an optimistic belief in the ideals of hard work and meritocracy, which are central to the American Dream. Both are well-educated and financially stable, qualities that align with traditional notions of upward mobility. Jassim, a dedicated hydrologist with a Ph.D. from an American university, finds meaning in his work on improving water systems. At the same time, Salwa strives for personal and professional fulfilment in her job at a bank. Their comfortable life in Tucson, Arizona—complete with a modern home and material comforts—seems to validate their belief in the opportunities afforded by the United States.

However, their idyllic vision of the "Promised Land" begins to crumble in the wake of the September 11 attacks. The ensuing climate of heightened surveillance and suspicion disproportionately targets Arab Americans, and Jassim and Salwa increasingly find themselves viewed not as individuals but as representatives of a feared and mistrusted identity. This marks the beginning of their disillusionment, as their efforts to assimilate and succeed within American society are met with prejudice and exclusion.

The novel's critique of the American Dream aligns with David Harvey's (2005) analysis of neoliberalism, which exposes how systemic inequalities undermine the ideals of meritocracy and upward mobility. Jassim and Salwa's financial success, juxtaposed with their social and emotional alienation, reflects the contradictions inherent in the neoliberal vision of prosperity. Harvey argues that the commodification of labour and identity under neoliberalism exacerbates the marginalisation of minority groups, a dynamic that Halaby vividly portrays in her depiction of workplace discrimination and community ostracism (Harvey, 2005).

Nadine Naber's concept of "Arab American exceptionalism" underscores how Arab Americans, even before 9/11, were subjected to a process of racialisation that positioned them as "foreigners within." This phenomenon intensified in the post-9/11 era, as Arab and Muslim identities became synonymous with suspicion and terrorism (Naber, 2012). Halaby's portrayal of Jassim's experiences with the FBI investigation exemplifies this dynamic. Media stereotypes of Arabs as threats shape the bias Salwa and Jassim encounter, reflecting

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, which highlights how overlapping identities exacerbate discrimination. Jassim's identity as both an Arab and a Muslim subjects him to compounded discrimination, which manifests in both institutional scrutiny and social alienation.

Salwa's experiences align with Homi Bhabha's concept of "cultural hybridity" as she struggles to reconcile her Arab identity with her attempts to assimilate into American society. Her longing for Jordan and her feelings of alienation reflect the "unhomeliness" that Bhabha describes—a state of cultural and emotional displacement that disrupts the binaries of self and others (Bhabha, 1994). Salwa's affair with Jake and her subsequent victimisation also highlight the gendered dimensions of this alienation, reinforcing Naber's assertion that Arab women are often subjected to dual pressures of racial and gendered stereotyping.

Jassim's professional life reflects the precarious position of Arab Americans in a society shaped by post-9/11 fears. Despite his expertise and dedication, Jassim's colleagues and clients begin to question his loyalty and intentions solely because of his Arab heritage. These suspicions culminated in an FBI investigation based on baseless allegations that he might sabotage the city's water supply. The investigation, though unwarranted, tarnishes his reputation and serves as a stark reminder of how easily racial and cultural biases override professional achievements.

Similarly, Salwa encounters discrimination in her workplace, where her Palestinian heritage becomes a source of suspicion and hostility. Customers at the bank openly accuse her of being untrustworthy and, in some instances, dangerous, despite her attempts to assimilate through Western clothing and mannerisms. These interactions highlight the pervasive impact of stereotypes, which reduce Salwa's identity to a narrow and dehumanising caricature. Both Jassim and Salwa come to realise that their accomplishments and outward markers of success cannot shield them from the racial and cultural biases embedded in American society.

The external pressures of discrimination and alienation take a profound toll on Jassim and Salwa's marriage, further unravelling

their pursuit of the American Dream. Jassim, burdened by professional challenges and the emotional aftermath of accidentally killing a teenager in a car accident, becomes increasingly withdrawn. This emotional distance leaves Salwa feeling isolated and unsupported, prompting her to seek solace in an affair with her coworker, Jake. While Salwa's infidelity reflects her deep dissatisfaction and longing for connection, it also catalyses the couple's estrangement.

Salwa's miscarriage serves as a metaphor for the unattainability of the American Dream for marginalised groups, echoing Sara Ahmed's concept of "affective economies." Ahmed suggests that emotions such as fear and hope are circulated to justify systemic exclusions, with Arab Americans positioned as threats to the nation's security and cultural cohesion (Ahmed, 2004). Halaby's narrative thus critiques the disillusionment of the Haddads and the broader socio-political structures that perpetuate inequality and alienation.

Halaby uses the breakdown of their marriage to underscore the emotional cost of systemic discrimination and cultural displacement. The couple's inability to communicate effectively or provide mutual support exacerbates their struggles, illustrating how external pressures can fracture even the most personal and intimate bonds. Their marriage, once a foundation of shared hope and resilience, becomes another casualty of the societal forces that render them outsiders.

By the novel's conclusion, both Jassim and Salwa confront the collapse of their aspirations and the irreparable damage to their sense of belonging. Jassim's reflection that Salwa might have been "better off staying in Jordan" encapsulates his recognition of the futility of their pursuit in a society that views them with hostility. Salwa's miscarriage serves as a poignant metaphor for their shattered dream, symbolising the loss of not only their hopes for the future but also their connection to one another and to the life they sought to build.

Salwa's decision to leave the United States and return to Jordan reflects her desire to reclaim a sense of cultural identity and escape the alienation she has experienced. However, her plans are derailed when she becomes a victim of physical violence and false accusations, leaving her hospitalised and alone. This final act of marginalisation underscores the depth of systemic and societal barriers

that prevent her from finding safety or resolution, even in her attempt to leave the environment that alienated her.

Through the disintegration of Jassim and Salwa's lives, Halaby critiques the exclusionary nature of the American Dream, exposing its limitations and contradictions. Their experiences reveal how systemic racism, socio-economic disparities, and cultural biases render this dream unattainable for many, particularly for those from marginalised communities. The Haddads' journey highlights how the ideals of opportunity and belonging, central to the Promised Land narrative, fail to account for the structural inequities and cultural prejudices that shape the immigrant experience. Halaby's portrayal of their unravelling offers a powerful indictment of a society that professes inclusion and meritocracy while perpetuating systemic exclusion and alienation.

Beyond Wealth: Emotional and Cultural Displacement in Arab American Lives

The novel also explores the tension between material success and emotional fulfilment. It illustrates how cultural displacement and societal prejudice can strip the latter of significance, even when the former seems achievable. Jassim and Salwa embody this dichotomy as they navigate the complexities of life as affluent Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11. While their financial stability and professional achievements suggest they have realised the American Dream, their lives are marked by emotional isolation and cultural estrangement, revealing the inadequacy of material success without belonging and connection.

At the outset, Jassim and Salwa appear to be living the quintessential immigrant dream. Jassim's successful career as a hydrologist and Salwa's respectable position at a bank allow them to maintain an enviable lifestyle in Tucson, Arizona. Their material success, symbolised by their luxurious home and financial security, conveys an outward image of stability and prosperity. However, Halaby subtly undermines this idealised portrayal, revealing how their material achievements mask more profound vulnerabilities tied to their cultural displacement and marginalised status in post-9/11 America.

Despite their professional accomplishments, Jassim and Salwa cannot escape the pervasive prejudices that shape perceptions of Arab Americans. Jassim's expertise and dedication to improving water systems are overshadowed by unfounded suspicions regarding his loyalty, particularly when he becomes the target of an FBI investigation. Similarly, Salwa's professional standing at the bank fails to shield her from daily microaggressions and demeaning stereotypes. These moments of systemic and personal bias expose the limitations of material success, which offers no immunity against the cultural and racial prejudices that define their lived experiences.

While Jassim and Salwa's material needs are satisfied, their emotional well-being deteriorates under the weight of cultural displacement and societal alienation. The post-9/11 atmosphere of suspicion and hostility exacerbates their feelings of isolation, leading to a disconnection from both their cultural heritage and their adopted home. This external hostility compounds their internal struggles, creating a rift in their relationship and deepening their alienation.

Salwa's emotional turmoil is particularly pronounced as she grapples with reconciling her Arab identity with the expectations and prejudices of American society. Her longing for a sense of belonging surfaces in her nostalgic memories of Jordan and her estrangement from Jassim, whom she perceives as emotionally distant. Her affair with Jake, a coworker, emerges as a misguided attempt to find intimacy and solace in the face of her dissatisfaction. However, this relationship ultimately magnifies her feelings of guilt and alienation, underscoring the complexities of seeking fulfilment in a context marked by cultural and emotional displacement.

While less overtly nostalgic, Jassim struggles with the emotional toll of his displacement. His adherence to routines and professional dedication reflect an effort to maintain control in a destabilising environment. However, his growing sense of detachment, compounded by guilt over accidentally killing a teenager named Evan, reveals the depth of his internal conflict. His budding friendship with Penny, a café server, highlights his search for understanding and connection outside the confines of his strained marriage. However, this relationship, like Salwa's affair, serves as a reprieve rather than a

resolution, emphasising the pervasive impact of their emotional estrangement.

Halaby situates the emotional struggles of Jassim and Salwa within the broader context of cultural displacement and its societal implications. Their experiences highlight how the loss of cultural continuity and the pressures of assimilation undermine identity and belonging. Salwa's yearning for the familiarity of Jordan—symbolised by her visits to Randa, a friend who maintains strong cultural ties—starkly contrasts with her alienation in America. Similarly, Jassim's encounters with socioeconomic disparities and prejudice challenge his belief in the inclusivity of the American Dream, forcing him to confront the systemic barriers that render such aspirations unattainable for many immigrants.

Halaby's narrative critiques societal structures prioritising material success while neglecting individuals' emotional and cultural needs. The novel underscores how the pursuit of financial stability, though often presented as the cornerstone of the immigrant experience, fails to address the complexities of cultural displacement and societal bias. Through the Haddads' struggles, Halaby exposes the limitations of a system that reduces immigrant success to economic metrics while overlooking the human costs of exclusion and alienation. While their narratives underscore the emotional toll of cultural displacement, Halaby also points to the systemic roots of their challenges. Institutional biases and societal prejudices intersect to create an environment where Arab Americans are viewed with suspicion, regardless of their achievements. The post-9/11 climate amplifies these biases, reinforcing a binary of belonging and otherness that isolates individuals.

Exoticisation and Violence: The Gendered Challenges of Cultural Displacement

The interplay of gender and power dynamics, cross-cultural interactions, and societal structures shapes the experiences of Arab American women. Through Salwa's relationships and encounters, the novel examines orientalist fantasies, gendered stereotypes, and violence that expose the vulnerabilities faced by Arab women in post-9/11 America. By critiquing these dynamics, Halaby underscores how societal structures perpetuate inequality and objectification, revealing

the intersecting challenges of cultural displacement and gendered power imbalances.

Salwa's relationship with Jake, her coworker at the bank, exemplifies the influence of Orientalist fantasies on cross-cultural dynamics. Jake perceives Salwa as not an individual but an exoticised figure, reducing her identity to stereotypical notions of the "mystical East." He views her cultural background and appearance as alluring and mysterious, stating:

"Mature without seeming to be ancient. Her sophistication grew as a result of this and her foreignness. It's exotic. Also, I'm married. The difficulty of this combination piqued his interest, and he wondered if all Arab women had this allure (physical and the shadow of a man behind them) and if that was why they wore veils" (Halaby, 2007, p. 171).

Jake's thoughts encapsulate his orientalist mindset, portraying Salwa as both alluring and constrained by cultural and gendered stereotypes. His fixation on her "foreignness" and the imagined "shadow of a man behind her" reflects the Western trope of Arab women as both oppressed and sexually intriguing. This dynamic mirrors broader orientalist narratives that simultaneously romanticise and otherwise Arab identity, reducing individuals to fantasies steeped in cultural stereotypes.

For Salwa, Jake's attention temporarily relieves her alienation within her marriage and American society. However, the relationship highlights the inherent power imbalance in Jake's inability to see her as an equal. His view of Salwa as an embodiment of his fantasies rather than a person perpetuates her objectification and diminishes her agency. Through this portrayal, Halaby critiques the dehumanising effects of orientalist assumptions in cross-cultural relationships, exposing the limits of such connections.

Salwa's experiences throughout the novel are shaped by the intersection of racial and gendered stereotypes that dictate how others perceive her. As an Arab woman in post-9/11 America, she becomes a target of dual biases, where her ethnicity and gender amplify societal scrutiny and prejudice. Her identity is continually reduced to

assumptions that cast her as a threat, an object of fascination, or a symbol of submissiveness.

This reduction is evident in her interactions with a white American woman at the bank, who reacts with hostility upon learning Salwa is Palestinian. The woman's accusatory questions, such as, "Does it mean you will steal my money and blow up my world?" (Halaby, 2007, p. 113), reveal the racialised and gendered fears projected onto Arab women. The customer's subsequent refusal to be served by Salwa underscores a broader societal unwillingness to trust or respect Arab women, relegating them to roles defined by suspicion and fear.

Jake's treatment of Salwa reflects a different manifestation of gendered stereotypes, where her "exotic" identity is idealised and fetishised. His romanticisation of her foreignness diminishes her individuality, reducing her worth to how she fulfils his orientalist fantasies. This dynamic erodes Salwa's sense of self. It reinforces the power imbalance in their relationship, leaving her struggling to assert her agency in the face of external narratives imposed upon her.

The culmination of Salwa's relationship with Jake is marked by violence, illustrating the vulnerabilities Arab women face in cross-cultural relationships shaped by power imbalances. When Salwa decides to end the affair and return to Jordan, Jake reacts with anger and entitlement, accusing her of exploiting him for personal gain: "You came because you want sex. That's why. That's what all of this has been about. I've cared about you, and you've used me" (Halaby, 2007, p. 319).

Jake's outburst underscores his inability to view Salwa as an equal or respect her autonomy. His accusations reflect his sense of ownership over her, framing her decision as a betrayal rather than an assertion of independence. This entitlement culminates in an act of physical violence, as Jake assaults Salwa, throwing her down the stairs in a fit of rage. The violence is not merely personal but symbolic of broader societal dynamics. Jake's use of racial slurs during the assault— "Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch" (Halaby, 2007, p. 332) —reveals the intersection of gendered and racialised violence.

Salwa's identity as an Arab woman makes her a target of both physical harm and dehumanisation, reflecting the systemic forces that marginalise and objectify women like her. Halaby critiques these power dynamics by exposing how such violence is rooted in societal structures that perpetuate inequality and reinforce stereotypes.

Anchoring Identity: The Role of Cultural Practices for Arab Americans in Transition

Cultural practices maintain a sense of belonging and continuity amidst the challenges of immigration and assimilation. Through the contrasting experiences of Salwa and her friend Randa, Halaby illustrates how traditions, language, and rituals are crucial anchors for Arab immigrants navigating cultural displacement. These practices serve as sources of comfort, familiarity, and vital links to heritage and identity, revealing the complex interplay between cultural continuity and the pressures of integration.

Randa epitomises preserving cultural identity through deliberate engagement with her Jordanian heritage. Unlike Salwa, who struggles with disconnection, Randa maintains a profound sense of rootedness by integrating traditional practices into her daily life. Halaby describes Randa's connection to her culture in evocative terms, noting that her "fingers [are] stuffed with centuries of wisdom, knots of history and meaning" (Halaby, 2007, p. 91). This imagery underscores Randa's active effort to keep her heritage alive, making it an integral part of her identity rather than a distant memory.

Randa's home serves as a microcosm of her cultural world, filled with markers of her Jordanian heritage. Her domestic space becomes a sanctuary of cultural continuity from Arabic television channels to traditional foods and beverages. Halaby highlights the emotional significance of these elements through Randa's attachment to coffee, a recurring symbol of her heritage. As Randa prepares coffee, "She stirred them in, reached across the continental United States, stretched her arm across the Atlantic until she found Beirut, and ... the coffee boiled away thousands of miles of homesickness" (Halaby, 2007, pp. 283–284). This vivid description encapsulates the power of rituals to bridge physical and emotional distances, allowing Randa to feel a sense of belonging despite her geographical separation

from Jordan. Randa's immersion in her traditions provides her with stability and resilience, enabling her to navigate the complexities of life in America without losing her sense of identity.

In stark contrast, Salwa grapples with a deepening disconnection from her Jordanian heritage, exacerbating her alienation and dissatisfaction in America. Salwa occupies a liminal space between two worlds: unable to fully integrate into American society and increasingly estranged from her Arab roots. This cultural and emotional dislocation contributes to her sense of isolation and her struggles to find fulfilment. Salwa's visits to Randa's home temporarily alleviate her feelings of disconnection by evoking memories of her upbringing. These moments of cultural immersion provide a fleeting sense of comfort, but they also highlight the gap between her present life and her roots. Randa urges Salwa to return to Jordan to reconnect with her heritage and regain her sense of self, saying, "You need to go home for a little while. You need to be with your mother and sisters and your culture, where things like this can't happen..." (Halaby, 2007, p. 288). This advice underscores Randa's belief that Salwa's unhappiness stems partly from her inability to maintain a strong connection to her cultural identity.

Her perception of American life further compounds Salwa's alienation as lacking the richness and vibrancy of her Jordanian upbringing. Randa captures this sentiment when she remarks, "Living in America is easier here than at home... But American life, as [she] sees it, lacks flavour, that tastiness you find at home" (Halaby, 2007, p. 283). This contrast between the depth of Jordanian cultural practices and the perceived superficiality of American life underscores displacement's emotional and cultural costs, particularly for immigrants like Salwa, who struggle to reconcile their dual identities.

Halaby employs food, language, and rituals as potent symbols of cultural identity, underscoring their role in fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. For Randa, these elements are essential to her identity, creating a tangible link to her homeland. Her preparation of traditional dishes, her engagement with Arabic media, and her adherence to cultural customs transform her home into a space of cultural preservation. These practices affirm her heritage and offer

her emotional grounding in a foreign environment. In contrast, Salwa's sporadic engagement with Jordanian traditions highlights her growing detachment from her roots. While she occasionally partakes in cultural practices, such as sharing meals with Randa, these moments are insufficient to counterbalance her sense of alienation. Halaby uses this disparity to illustrate the importance of cultural continuity in mitigating the emotional challenges of displacement.

Language also plays a central role in shaping identity and belonging. Randa's consistent use of Arabic reinforces her connection to her heritage, allowing her to remain linguistically and culturally rooted. Conversely, Salwa's limited use of Arabic reflects her estrangement from her roots and her struggles to navigate her dual identity. This linguistic divide mirrors the broader contrast between the two women, with Randa embodying the resilience of cultural preservation and Salwa grappling with the emotional toll of disconnection.

Conclusion

Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* offers a profound exploration of the challenges faced by Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11, exposing the emotional toll and systemic biases stemming from cultural displacement and societal prejudice. Through the disintegration of Jassim and Salwa's lives, the novel critiques the fragility of the American Dream for marginalised communities, illustrating how professional success and personal aspirations are undermined by racial profiling and xenophobia.

Halaby's narrative transcends individual struggles, framing the Arab American experience within broader discussions of race, identity, and belonging. By engaging with scholarly works, such as those by Edward Said and Nadine Naber, the novel critiques media stereotypes and societal structures that perpetuate exclusion and reinforce the perception of Arab Americans as perpetual outsiders.

Ultimately, the work challenges readers to confront the enduring impacts of systemic prejudice and reflect on the tension between America's ideals and its realities. Halaby's work calls for empathy, inclusion, and equity, urging a collective effort to dismantle societal barriers and foster true cohesion. The novel's layered narrative

underscores literature's power to illuminate the intersections of personal trauma, cultural displacement, and the quest for belonging in a polarised world.

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