

***The Psychology of the Other; Narrating Diaspora Identity and Psychic Trauma in Leila Halaby's Once in a Promised Land***

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**Abstract**

The word diaspora invokes trauma. Being positioned in the in-between space and the struggle to assert identity, attempting to rearticulate one's existence, and negotiating a state of being subject to othering and social discrimination all boil into the trauma hovering around diaspora characters. In *Once in a Promised Land*, Leila Halaby responds to Arab Americans' identity crisis in post 9/11 attacks. The novel is inscribed in Arab Anglophone fiction that documents the current cultural anxieties and deconstructs politics of identity and cultural production to voice out a juxtaposed complex projection of dual existence. Being an Arab and a Muslim in America in the aftermath of 9/11 meant being viewed with suspicion; following the storyline of Jassim and Salwa who flee Jordan to “the promised land” where their life’s walls started collapsing, Halaby projects the hostility and pressure Arab-Muslims go through in America. To illustrate the psychological dimension of migrant identity, the paper explores power relations and the politics of subjugation. The novel’s significance for the study lies mainly in it being a powerful contrapuntally written novel; it brings traditional readings and writings to a crisis. The text delves into the underpinnings of the migrants' experience to grasp the architecture of discursive construction of otherness be it; bodily, religious, or racial othering and allows diaspora characters to vocalize their rich and complex existence. The paper unpacks the narratives’ social and political discursive dynamics to highlight the wholeness of the psychological struggle, it makes use of Fanon's theory to gauge the effect of sociopolitical on the human psyche and capture the psychic trauma through the characters of Salwa and Jassim.

Keywords: Diaspora, Othering, Sociopolitics, Cultural Anxieties, Migration, 9/11 Attacks, Psychopolitics, Psychic Trauma, Vocalize Existence

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## Introduction

The word diaspora invokes trauma. Being positioned in the in-between space and the struggle to assert identity, attempting to rearticulate one's existence, and negotiating a state of being subject to othering and social discrimination all boil into the trauma hovering around diaspora characters. In *Once in a Promised Land*, Laila Halaby responds to Arab American identity crisis in post 9/11 attacks. The novel is inscribed in Arab Anglophone fiction that documents the current cultural anxieties and deconstructs politics of identity and cultural production to voice out a juxtaposed complex projection of dual existence. Halaby among other diaspora authors writes to challenge the metropolitan narrative and alters it to assert ostracized Arab subjects. Being an Arab and a Muslim in America in the aftermath of 9/11 meant being viewed with suspicion; following the storyline of Jassim and Salwa who flee Jordan to “the promised land” where their life’s walls started collapsing, Halaby projects the hostility and pressure Arab-Muslim struggle within America.

To illustrate the psychological dimension of migrant identity, the paper explores power relations and the politics of subjugation. The novel's significance for the study lies mainly in it being a powerful **contrapuntally** written novel. Said coined from music, advanced the "contrapuntal reading" to respond to and destabilize the narrative of power. Halaby’s narrative juxtaposes the dominant knowledge, her novel retrieves the silenced knowledge and complicates the simplistic linear narrative that underwrites the imperial power.

Halaby offers the life story of two characters, but throughout the narrative, she also gives us some historical accounts which inform our understanding of the narrative itself and diaspora characters' traumatized existence. The novel brings traditional readings and writings to a crisis by adding silenced narratives and accounting for more than one end of a text. It delves into the underpinnings of the migrants' experience to realize the architecture of discursive construction of otherness be it; bodily, religious, or racial othering and allows the Arab diaspora to vocalize their rich and complex existence. To understand the representation of diaspora characters and emphasize their mental and emotional experience, the paper makes use of postcolonial theories; namely Edward Said and Frantz Fanon.

The novel is considered a representing-fictional act of consciousness; it unpacks the narratives’ social and political discursive dynamics to highlight the wholeness of the struggle. Through her characters, Halaby delves into the Arab American psyche post 9/11 to destabilize a narrative of power and reverse orientalist views.

“Our role is to widen the field of discussion, not to set limits in accord with the prevailing authority”

Edward Said, *Orientalism*

## **Hypervisibility: racializing Arab-Americans post 9/11**

Addressing the literary and cultural-ness of texts to locate the repercussions of the power struggle and its psychological impact on diaspora subjects’ psyche is crucial in understanding the wholeness of diaspora consciousness. Halaby is an Arab American writer; she is a diaspora character defined by the duality of her existence. Her novel *Once in a Promised Land* is contextualized by world politics post 9/11; the U.S so-called "War on Terror", and institutionalized racism. Her novel is woven in resonance with the psychological and political tensions. Following the story of Jassim and Salwa, Halaby tells the story of a couple who left

Jordon to settle in the U.S. from the early lines of the story, Halaby (2007) points out the correlation of her protagonists' personal experiences with the political one to stress the hypervisibility of Arab-American subjects after 9/11 attacks:

Our main characters are Salwa and Jassim. 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.  
Nothing and everything. (p.VII-VIII)

Gregory Orfalea states that 9/11 is “the day on which Americans discovered the Arab world” (Shmidt, 2014, p.14). Before 9/11, Arab Americans were located at the site of marginality, they were made invisible. The politics of inclusion and exclusion place the Arab-American subject in a fluctuating state of being -a fluctuating state of oppression-. 9/11 forced them to the surface and exposed them to political violence; they had to endure the aftermath of the attacks for that time and for decades that follow. Salwa and Jassim were having a very normal life, in chapter two; Halaby presents an account of the wealthy lifestyle they carried out:

That afternoon, driving up recently repaved asphalt to his nestled-in-the-hills home, Jassim pulled up his glinty Mercedes next to one of many identical expectant mailboxes [...] the door of his car and the door of his house were across from each other [.....] today the quietness of the afternoon, the coolness of his house, Jassim removed a gleaming glass from a glossy maple cabinet and filled it with the purest water money could buy [.....] He pulled the trashcan [.....] into which he deposits a handful of direct mail and ads (except for Salwa’s over priced-underwear catalogue...). (P. 23-24).

Their lifestyle was pretty American, they were immersed in "the American dream" they have pursued in the U.S., and they thought of themselves as American citizens with no distinctions. Until that moment “the promised land” started racializing Muslims and sponsoring racism against Arab-American citizens, Salwa and Jassim weren't conscious of the difference tagged on them. Media channels and the government articulated a polarizing discourse; Bush's widely known expression "either you are with us or with the terrorists" forces the division. “You should put one [the American flag] on your car, on the back window. You never know what people are thinking, and having this will let them know where you stand” (p. 55) Salwa’s co-worker tells her.

### **The alterity discourse**

In different instances of the novel, most American characters post 9/11 are depicted as fanatic subjects who viewed Arabs and Muslims as a monolithic rigid entity. Their orientalist perception brings into account the colonial infrastructure, the asymmetrical legacies of power, and the culture of subjugation. Edward Said’s influential book on postcolonial studies *Orientalism* deals with the question of representation, it dismantles the pre-constructed lens through which the Orient is framed. Said states that “it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts,

values), power moral (as with ideas about what “we” do and what “they” do or understand as “we” do” (1978, p.12). Orientalism then is a discourse that predisposes people to develop certain views about the Orient. Orientalism applies to Halaby’s text since it allows us to come to grips with the epistemological, political, and cultural orientalist tropes mobilized in her American characters’ imageries of Arabs in the contemporary era.

Then she went back into the corner where they had started and saw him walking towards her from the back with an odd expression on his face, almost fear. [...] she’s following me. Apparently I am a security threat. [...] “Why are you following my husband?” “I’m doing my job, ma’am.” “Which is what exactly,” asked Salwa with scissors in her voice. “To protect the security of this establishment.” (p.28-29)

The sales clerk Amber views Jassim with suspicion, she calls a security guard on him, and in response to Salwa’s inquiries on why did she do so, she claims; “he was standing here and staring too long”... “He just scared me” (p.30).

Penny argues:

Jassim is a good guy - he’s not like them, shouldn’t be judged like them. But those people over there, they oppress women and kill each other, they’re the ones who should be bombed. (P.281)

Penny's mindset maintains a binarist structure; the novel’s portrayal of many American characters namely Penny, Amber, and Jassim’s coworker who reported him reflects the dichotomy of us versus them, they mobilize generalizations and subscribe to a standardized view of the world. To challenge these linear narratives that underwrite the imperial power, Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* advanced the contrapuntal reading or the contrapuntal method to emphasize the importance of accounting for more than one end of a text; it is crucial to read through the underpinnings and architecture of a text to allow counter-readings to emerge, ergo; silenced narratives and marginalized groups vocalize their existence and offer a more nuanced, rich and complex reading.

### **Diasporic novel: Seeing through the contrapuntal**

Halaby subscribes to diaspora authors whose work is contrapuntally written; they account for the alterity discourse and point out new patterns. Her novel shifts the gaze and reverses orientalist discourse. What concern the novel are the aspects and reverberations of the socio-political impacts of epistemic violence that manifests itself in everyday practices of Arab-American subjects and subjectivities, both Jassim and Salwa grappled with identity. Being interrogated by the FBI based on the allegations of a coworker made Jassim furious and disappointed in the land of dreams:

Jassim had done nothing wrong and this was America and there should have to be proof of negligence on his part for his job to be affected. People, companies, the city, shouldn't be able to put accounts on the basis of his being an Arab. Yes, finally he saw what had been sitting at the back of his consciousness for some time in a not-so-whispered voice: *with or against*. But was he not *with*? (p.234)

America racialized a religion, Jassim and Salwa weren’t even depicted as Muslim practitioners, their lifestyle was American. But post 9/11 pulled out their race against them. Salwa was mistreated by customers in the bank, and Jassim was exposed to outspoken racism

on different occasions throughout the novel, their marital life was highly impacted by racial violence. The feelings of loss, alienation, and discrimination drove them away from each other, and their life together showed serious cracks and fissures, especially after Salwa's miscarriage. Being viewed with suspicion and hostility, Jasim and Salwa became estranged from each other.

### **Narrating post 9/11 consciousness**

Their search for assertion made them seek comfort and acceptance from characters that fit into what America considers an American citizen. Salwa found comfort and acceptance in Jack's support and Jassim with Penny.

Let me tell you everything Randa and then, you tell me what I should do" Randa nodded. "After the miscarriage, remember, I felt depressed, sad, all the time. It just seemed to go on and on. There is this guy at work..." "American?" "Yes. And he was very nice to me, very cheerful, and I would forget about the baby, forget about the miscarriage, about Jassim, about all the problems in this country. About all the problems of my marriage. He would just talk about things, stories from his world, they were all simple, but it was fun. (p.285)

He [Jassim] had no interest in a relationship. He just wanted to be with Penny and her large breasts and her soothing easy smile and her **lack of connection to his life**. The further away he drove from Denny's, however, the more impossible the scenario seemed. At a spotlight, he pulled out the piece of paper on which she had written the phone number. "I can't do this," he said aloud in Arabic. "I could have then. Could have taken her away, somewhere private, and had American sex with her, fulfilled the need, but this takes too much thought. (p.158)

Jassim wanted to be with Penny for "...her lack of connection to his life", the burden of race Fanon refers to in his chapter "The Fact of Blackness"; when the black man starts seeing himself as "he" instead of "I", the use of the third person consciousness implies that the black man steps out of his own body and watch himself doing normal things that he felt abnormal while doing because of his blackness, the pressure of the gaze makes one uncomfortable with one's skin.

Fanon touches on DuBoisian term "double consciousness", they are both concerned with the mental conflict of dual identity and the repercussions of structural violence on subjects. Likewise; Halaby points out the struggle from a contemporary perspective, in the aftermath of 9/11, Arab American writing surged as a response to the politics of racialization. In *Once in a Promised Land*, both Salwa and Jassim were searching for a space of refuge, a space in which they don't identify with their demonized race. Fanon views this space however as an emphasis on imprisonment. Frantz Fanon who is a postcolonial writer, political philosopher, and psychiatrist engages in understanding the psychological traumas and the effect of sociopolitical on the human psyche, his works are concerned with the psyche, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, through empirical research he advanced a praxis through which Fanon asserts that understanding how the system of violence is established is key to understanding the impact of epistemic violence on subjects' consciousness, in that he is still concerned with the psyche and "psychopolitics", but also realizes that these psychological traumas can only be overcome through responding to the system of violence and engaging in change through creating a new kind of humanism.

## **Conclusion**

The paper explores a discourse that challenges the linear narrative forcing a reduced ability to resist. It engages in the ongoing debate over the implications of relations of power on identity and migrants as it has been and is currently experienced by diaspora postcolonial subjects. By going over the diverse resonances of the asymmetrical legacies to point out a new mode of self-representation that encompasses insight into the psychological aspects of violence or violent political system in post 9/11 towards Arab-American subjects, and resistance to linear narratives presented through Laila Halaby's consciousness.

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