Lifting the Veil or Keeping It? The Arab Americans between Acceptance and Assimilation

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DOI 10.56177/jhss.2.15.2024.art.5

Abstract:
This article examines the complex position of Arab Americans between acceptance and assimilation in the US society, exploring how their identity has been shaped by historical dislocation, settlement, and cultural negotiation. Revisiting the veil metaphor, we consider the symbolic and literal barriers to integration, beginning with analyzing early Arab American experiences in the 19th century. The autobiography of Omar ibn Said, an enslaved West African, is a crucial historical perspective that highlights the resilience of an Islamic identity challenged by forced conversion and enslavement. Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* extends this narrative, illustrating the double-consciousness of Arab Americans in the post-9/11 era. Through Salwa and Jassim's struggles with racism, identity, and the illusory nature of the American Dream, the novel reveals the tension between external pressures to assimilate and internal efforts to maintain cultural identity. This study underscores the ongoing challenge of navigating cultural preservation and societal acceptance for Arab Americans.

Keywords: Arab Americans, assimilation, identity, Omar ibn Said, Laila Halaby, double-consciousness, post-9/11

1. Introduction: The Metaphor of the Veil Revisited

The participants of the First pan-African Conference (London, July 1900) unanimously adopted the document "Address to the Nations of the World." The document, drafted and signed by W.E.B. Du Bois, contained the famous sentence: "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line". Du Bois used the sentence again in his volume *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In his introduction to the volume, he begins to rationalize the historical conflict and turmoil within the United States upon the issue of race and explains: "This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of color line". In "Of the Dawn of Freedom" – the second essay of the book – he develops on the same idea,

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expanding the concept to envelop the other nations of the world, where Du Bois was convinced that the color-line was the main problem those nations were confronted with: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea". The same idea is almost obsessively resumed at the end of the essay.

In this seminal volume, Du Bois followed two main directions: (1) to demonstrate what it means to be black in twentieth-century America, and (2) to show the importance of race in the century that had just started. He further develops on the concept and considers the condition of the African Americans in a much larger context:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and the Mongolian, the Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this *double-consciousness*, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 1965: 10-11, emphasis added).

The collective experiences of discrimination and the memory of resistance and oppression have given rise in the heart of the African American community to some group strategies and critical perspectives that aim at the "acquisition of autonomy and power" by blacks. This resilience and strength in the face of adversity is truly admirable. In this sense, the contours of the struggle in favor of blacks have given rise to a particular awareness of "our" community, their needs, and their aspirations. The primary ideological debates that forged the political thought of the black population of the United States were always based on the cultural orientation and the political consciousness of the blacks.

Du Bois speaks of the "veil" that attaches itself to the souls of black people at birth. This so-called veil is a metaphor for the separation and invisibility of black life and existence in America. As long as one is wrapped within the "veil," one's attempts to gain self-consciousness and collective consciousness within society will fail because one will always see the image of oneself reflected by others. The veil acts as a physical barrier, branding blacks as "others," and psychologically affects him as he internalizes being seen as a "problem". Du Bois believes that the veil hides the humanity of blacks as the black relation of whites has always been marked by violence. However, he also offers a beacon of hope, believing that in order to get to rid of the veil, blacks need to progress through education and political achievement. This emphasis on education and political achievement inspires hope for a brighter future.

2. Origins, dislocation, settlement

More than one century and a half later, the Arabs settled in America have found their way into the literary landscape and, despite the general ignorance about Arab Americans among North Americans at large and the unfavorable post-9/11 atmosphere, have managed to contribute works that aspire to a place in the canon of American literature. Besides the sporadic references to African slaves of Arab ancestry (or Arabic-speaking enslaved Muslims) during the slavery years, the Arabs came to America in two successive, significant waves, the first lasting from the 1870s to the onset of World War II and the second one, triggered by the foundation of the State of Israel in 1947, continued to the 21st century, having been seriously intensified by the recent Syrian migrant crisis. As a direct result of the first wave of immigration, 77% of Arab Americans today identify themselves as Christian, despite the majority of Arabs worldwide being Muslim. Immigration to the United States was restricted following World War I. These first two waves of immigrants came mainly from rural areas and had limited amounts of formal education. In the 1970s, political tensions in the Middle East were high, and the United States began to diversify: more Arab Muslims began immigrating, as well as Arabs from urban areas and with higher educational backgrounds.

Migration means displacement, which leads to the need to come to terms with a new literal and metaphorical perspective on one's "home," which, in the case of the self-exiled writer, acquires a new depth of meaning. This new dimension can no longer be generalized: it becomes individual and personal, as the writer's not-so-distant past and the immediate present interact, while memory connects one's experiences of the old home – be it one's childhood home, homeland, nation, or country – with the whole burden of cultural, religious, ideological and political loyalties.

However, significant events on the world political scene, especially the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, contributed to a tightening of the relations between these previously separated communities. Irrespective of the immigration wave they belong to, the term "Arab Americans" generally refers to Arab immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa and their descendants. Statistics usually refer to first-, second-, and third-generation Arab Americans. One exciting aspect of the first wave is that the great majority of the immigrants of the first generation came from the so-called Greater Syria, which covered present-day Lebanon, and were primarily Christian. Immigrants from other countries of the Arab world, such as Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen, followed them. They included large numbers of Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'a. One problem the immigrants faced in their host countries was a matter of

designation and identity: they were referred to as Arabs, Arabians, Syrian, or Syrian-Lebanese.

As a result of these two waves of migration, almost 300,000 people left Lebanon to settle either in the neighboring Arab countries or in more distant lands in Europe or North America. This movement back and forth between those two main stages never stopped. According to Mangaro, "some of Lebanon's most influential literary figures [are known to have] lived their adult lives and produced most of their works outside their native land" (Mangaro, 1994: 374).

The Arab world had its share of the growing migration process that dislocated a large number of people from Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa to the rest of the world. In his online article, "Voice after Exit: Revolution and Migration in the Arab World", Fargues estimates that around 20 million Arabs live in other countries, and suggests that "a culture of emigration has developed throughout the Middle East and North African region," the reasons for such a massive migration is not only economic but also political. He distinguishes between Arab "migrant-sending" and "migrant-receiving states" – by which he means Bahrain, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia (Fargues 2011: np). This massive migration was periodically triggered and fed by political events, such as the 1948 Palestinian exodus – known as al-Nakbah (النكبة, meaning "disaster," "catastrophe," or "cataclysm") – or the long Civil War in Lebanon, and the 2003 allied invasion of Iraq which resulted in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and his regime, leading the country into internal inter-confessional and political struggles (see also Marfleet, 2007: 397). The statistics show that, following the Anglo-American invasion, over four million Iraqi citizens chose exile, and the situation has not improved, while almost half of the Palestinians residing in the occupied territories left their country of origin.

As formulated by Du Bois, double-consciousness has come to denote the trauma experienced by Arab Americans, whose presence is perceived as *Otherness* by the white majority and the acute feeling of invisibility that the Arabs in America have about themselves. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the US symbols, the Gulf Wars, the wars in Iraq, and other unfavorable, more recent events, they have been widely considered to belong to terrorist groups. This situation further worsened their image. It is surprising that well into the 21st century, we find Arab Americans classified as "Negroes". Trapped in between two cultures, their rights and citizenship denied, they have been greatly concerned with an increased feeling of in-betweenness and double-consciousness.

Jordanian researcher Abdullah K Shehabat contends that according to Franz Fanon, the concept of double consciousness may apply to the other colonized people, as seriously affected as the African Americans:

> There will be serious psycho-affective injuries, and the results will be individuals without an anchor, without a horizon, colorless, stateless, rootless – a race of angles. It will be also quite normal to hear certain natives declare, 'I speak as a Senegalese and as a Frenchman…' The intellectual, who is Arab and French, or Nigerian and English, when he comes up against the need to take on two nationalities, chooses if he wants to remain true to himself, the negation of one of these determinations (qtd. in Shehabat 2015: 43).

In response to the liminal situation they find themselves in, the Arab Americans struggle for the reconciliation of the American and Arab cultures to secure their position in racist America, trying to cope with their cultural heritage in the new environment. Their existence spans the two cultures, opposing identities, and linguistic dualism. It is a hyphenated existence, which explains their disposition towards improvisation, to finally combine their Arab past and the American present into a completely new identity – the Arab American. As a result of their involvement in socio-political life, there is a tendency among Arab American intellectuals to adapt to the new environment by imitating the literary traditions of America and writing about their position on identity matters, racial problems, and gender.

Split identity, dislocation, adaptation, assimilation, relocation, and allegiance are the main elements that give substance and endurance to the fiction of Arab American women writers. What is essential to our analysis is that these are also the main concerns of the African American community, with the difference that the Arabs – not considering the few Arabic-speaking, enslaved Muslims – came to America of their own volition. In contrast, the slave traders had brought over the Africans. Irrespective of the writer's belonging to the first or the second wave of Arab migration, their novels convey an insider's view on the difficulties felt by the immigrants, the female protagonists often vacillating between their native countries and the adoptive America, having to cope with their hyphenated identities, and the official allegiance to America, while preserving their Arab cultural heritage, and facing different manifestations of segregation and even racism – especially during the post-9/11 decade. They are forced to suffer the consequences of adapting to life in a secular society in which the values of the Islamic religion are considered foreign and associated with terrorism. For Arab Christians, the situation is not much simplified, and they are often forced to bear the consequences of their association by the white majority with Islamic extremism.

Moreover, in the interminable debate between two seemingly antinomical concepts such as Islam and secularism, it will be noted over and over again that it is often the question of the Muslim woman that resurfaces like a scarecrow that is brandished on both sides. It is this

question of the Muslim woman and her identity that seems to play a big part in the future of this "living together", both in Western society and in the interior of Muslim communities. The question of the Islamic veil in some Western European countries, for example, with laws prohibiting the open display of religious signs and all the intellectual neurosis that it has engendered, is irrefutable proof and proves once again that we are unfortunately witnessing a debate where the stigmatization of the other on the one hand and the passionate reaction of identity on the other side, do not touch upon the real fundamental questions.

Arab American literature in English written by women has undergone an undeniable boom since the 1980s through the historical, political, and social conjunctures sketching the contours of this literary current. The Arab American experience takes shape and is defined in the literary space that writers appropriate to confront, interrogate, and negotiate their multiple and even contradictory identities, the fruits of voluntary and/or forced exile, to the countries that dominated/dominate them. It is an American literary movement born at the beginning of the 20th century, with the first predominantly Christian migratory wave from the Middle East (notably Syria and Lebanon). Its most famous author is Kahlil Gibran. Although the first wave attempted to assert a literary identity at the intersection of Arabic literature and European literary forms, the two following waves of migration (which arrived in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s successively) give it all its meaning, nourished by its geographical, religious, political identity. The main themes in the American Arabic literature are the notion of "home", memories, the political instability upsetting the Middle East countries (the Palestinian cause among others), and the daily discrimination. Suheir Hammad, Mohja Kahf, Diana Abu-Jaber, Etel Adnan, Joseph Geha, Laila Halaby, and Elmaz Abinader are some names belonging to this literary stream. The emergence of Arab American literature situates itself at the intersection of the "visible" migration in the 1960s – with Muslim, educated, and nationalist people who came to the United States because of the conflicts created by US imperialism in the region – and the claims of the civil rights movement taking place at the same time.

As for women, they have several challenges: to inhabit and appropriate writing that has been dominated by men until now, to write in the language of the other (that of the former colonizer who expropriated you of your language and your own country), to negotiate a double loyalty that is double-edged as it can be transformed into a double betrayal, to bring out an I/ I when the body one lives in is doubly colonized and claimed, and institutionalized differently by the two countries, involving remedies of oneself in a new space, an in-between. As we can notice, we cannot ask these questions and challenges with the grids of reading traditionally in hands: it is necessary to consider a

theoretical framework that includes not only exile and its effects, but also the effect of exile on the body. As Frantz Fanon points out, this in-between can become a pathological factor, as women do not have "land" to trust. The body is heavily laden under the weight of interstices that cross and dominate. It is, therefore, essential to consider the notion of hybridity marked by exile, which Homi Bhabha considers as a positionality from which new positions emerge. However, he neglects the disabling aspects that this hybrid could cause. This is why, before beginning the question of writing, it is essential to cross the theories on hybridity with theories of the body – referring to the works of Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu – to consider better institutional violence, particularly in migration.

In order to escape this double invasion and this double blockage, women resort to writing that allows the body to "map" on their own terms. This intervention aims first to briefly present the colonial and/ or imperial history, introducing not only the processes of loss vs. (con) quest for identity, but also giving birth to the first literary works, as well as the leit-motifs that cross them, which intersect, and even intermingle to give form to these literatures. This comparative approach is the first step in uncovering the processes of strangeness and strangeness caused by this double exile experienced by women. In order to question the two types of literature resulting from migration and tackle them more concretely, we will take examples from these two currents where women try to escape their double exclusion, their double foreign. Can female writing faithfully reproduce the violence of hybridity, exile, and the appropriation of the body that may never have belonged to them? What strategies do women use to (re)appropriate their family lines, diasporic trajectories, and bodies through writing? *Arab American literature* is a diasporic construction crossed by legal, historical, colonial/ imperial, and migratory forces.

3. "The Autobiography of Omar ibn Said" – an early written testimony

The following words were written by an American African slave in 1831, praising the benevolence of his masters who fed him properly and allowed him to read the Gospel and confess his faith in Jesus:

> O ye people of North Carolina, O ye people of S. Carolina, O ye people of America all of you; have you among you any two such men as Jim Owen and John Owen? These men are good men. What food they eat they give to me to eat. As they clothe themselves they clothe me. They permit me to read the gospel of God, our Lord, and Saviour, and King; who regulates all our circumstances, our health and wealth, and who bestows his mercies willingly, not by constraint. According to power I open my heart, as to a great light, to receive the true way, the way of the Lord Jesus the Messiah (Omar ibn Said, in Shell and Sollors 2000: np).

The author of the first known autobiography of an Arab American, Omar ibn Said, liked to refer to himself as "Prince Moreau of Fayetteville, North Carolina". He was an American slave of African ancestry. Despite his circumstances, he maintained his identity as a West African with a solid Arabic and the Qur'an education. His conversion to Christianity did not erase his Muslim heritage, as he continued to write in Arabic and exchange letters with other Arabic-speaking enslaved people in America. His mastery of both Arabic and English, the language he acquired as a slave, and his exquisite calligraphic skill, all demonstrate his resilience and scholarly interests, even in the face of slavery.

The existing translation of the 18-page Arabic original of Said's autobiography resembles many other slave narratives, with the difference that it begins with recollected passages from the Holy Qur'ran and invocations of the Christian God. We are offered a few details on the author's birth in Futa Toro near the Senegal River, followed by an account of his enslavement, but his capture by "a large army, who killed many men" and his crossing of "the great sea" – a long and painful passage that lasted a month and a half. We find eye witness testimonies of the violence and cruelty of the slave trade and the terrors experienced by the slaves during the middle passage (in Jameson 1831: 793).

The Muslim slave's account of his Christian enslavers who, contrary to the Christian faith, do not hesitate to have him enchained, transported as merchandise, and then sold in slavery is not very different from other similar accounts that comment on the Christian slave traders' actions and their reasons to justify the slave trade. Despite the risks, the author courageously expresses his criticism, a testament to his bravery and resilience in the face of oppression.

For Omar Said, who had formally converted to Christianity at the time of writing his autobiography in 1831, Christianity and slavery are opposite notions. He describes his first master, Johnson, as "a small, weak, and wicked man, called Johnson, a complete infidel, who had no fear of God at al"' (*Ibidem*: 793, emphasis added). This quote reflects his disillusionment with his first Christian master, who did not embody the Christian values of mercy and compassion. His position towards his new faith is openly stated:

> When I was a Mohammedan, I prayed thus: 'Thanks be to God, Lord of all worlds, the merciful the gracious, Lord of the day of Judgment, thee we serve, on thee we call for help. Direct us in the right way, the way of those on whom thou hast had mercy, with whom thou hast not been angry and who walk not in error. Amen.' But now I pray 'Our Father,' etc., in the words of our Lord Jesus the Messiah (*Ibidem*: 794).

There is a detectable tension and critical dissonance in Omar ibn Said's autobiography. This tension is evident in his criticism of the Christian

slaveholders and his conversion to Christianity. One telling example is a commentary published in 1925 in *The Christian Advocate* that shows the reviewer's enthusiasm at Said's having the possibility of reading the Bible in Arabic. This tension and dissonance reflect the complexities of his experiences and his feelings towards his Christian slave holders:

> Some years since, he united himself to the Presbyterian church in this place, of which he continues an orderly and respectable member. A gentleman who felt a strong interest for the good *Prince Moro*, as he is called, sent to the British Bible Society, and procures for him an Arabick Bible; so that he now reads the scriptures in his native language, and blesses Him who causes good to come out of evil by making him a slave. His good master has offered to send him to his native land, his home and his friends; but he says "*No*, – this is my home, and here are my friends, and here is my Bible; I enjoy all I want in this world. If I should return to my native land, the fortune of war might transport me to a country where I should be deprived of the greatest of all blessings, that of worshipping the true and living God, and his Son Jesus Christ, whom to worship and serve in eternal life (Cowper, 1925: 307).

However, Said does not offer any reasons for his sudden conversion from Islam to Christianity and finds the differences between his old and new faith in the wording of the prayers. There is no strict chronological sequence of the events. However, the reader can quickly build a complex picture of the character's adventures: the middle passage, his escape, and recapture, his imprisonment, and his relocation to his new master's home. Despite the praises of John Owen and his family for the mild treatment and care and their contribution to his subsequent conversion to Christianity, he does not forget to mention that "I reside in this our country because of great necessity. Wicked men took me by violence and sold me to the Christians" (in Jameson 1831: 794).

4. Double-consciousness in Laila Halaby's Novel *Once in a Promised Land*

In Laila Halaby's novels, Arabness confronts Americanness. Her novel, *Once in a Promised Land*, opened the way by finally giving a voice to this rejected community, which does not understand what it is being criticized for and is trapped in the caricature images attached to it. The work of Laila Halaby, in line with the great American authors from different minorities, will try to change the majority's view of her community by giving it a "reforming" mirror. From the novel's first pages, the American Dream seems indeed to have been reached, with Jassim and Salwa being portrayed as perfect consumers of the upper class, totally integrated into this American culture of commodified hedonism. By their integration, they stand out from the other characters of Arab origin in the novel, who still practice their faith and traditions. They have moved away from it in their quest for Americanism to secularized spirituality:

> Jassim delighted in the morning's stillness, a time before emotions were awake, a time for contemplation. This day was no exception as he got up, washed his face, brushed his teeth, and relieved himself, beginning a morning ritual as close to prayer as he could allow. His thoughts hovered over the internal elements of self rather than the external. Jassim did not believe in God but in Balance (Halaby 2007: 3).

Laila Halaby draws a parallel between the Western and Eastern worlds, whose social conditions of poverty are widely shared. In doing so, it suggests in a roundabout way that the attacks on the World Trade Center quickly assimilated to religious extremism, which may also be due to an indirect reaction to this severe rise of world poverty, of which this extremism would be just a symptom. Socially, Jassim and Salwa have a way of life far superior to most other Americans; they live far away, protected from this lower class that they ignore, literally and figuratively. However, as the novel progresses, Jassim is led to understand the social existence of the Other, primarily through his visits to a part of the city hitherto unknown because he is penniless.

The character of Salwa herself tends to split up: in the face of a Salwa totally "Americanized" in the sense that she falls into all the faults of Western society stereotyped and pejoratively portrayed – she buys a multitude of silk pajamas, she consumes water carelessly, she lies to her husband and cheats on him – another Salwa steeped in idealized oriental values, such as the sense of family, economy, caring for others, remembers her childhood and is horrified facing the actions of the other Salwa. It seems, according to her father, that her blood was contaminated at birth because she was born in the United States. She has an excellent taste for drinking and fairy tales à la Walt Disney. Her attempt to reconcile the two aspects of her being fails because she ends up being hurt and decides to return to Jordan, a return that takes the form of a flight.

Through the integration of Jassim and Salwa into this American way of life, certainly more self-proclaimed than true, Halaby sheds even more light on the impact of 9/11 on the Arab-American community. Because, despite the degree of Americanness they seem to have reached, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, their origin will take over in the eyes of the people around them. As stated by Halaby in her prologue, they will again become what they never stopped being:

> Our main characters are Salwa and Jassim. We came to know them only after planes flown by Arabs and Muslims flattened the World Trade Center buildings. 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 (*Ibidem*: vii-viii).

The attacks of September 11, 2001, evoked from the first pages of Laila Halaby's novel, are first of all indirect, almost accidental: "You

haven't heard? In New York; there have been explosions in New York. Also in Washington. Planes. Someone flew planes into buildings. Into the World Trade Center" (*Ibidem*: 12).

The binary and racist opposition of "them against us" is experienced as aggression by Salwa, who does not understand that her identity is being questioned by excluding her from her own American Dream: "American flags waving, pale hands willing Jassim did not seem to be bothered, but could not tolerate it, those red, white, and blue fingers flapping at her, flicking her away" (*Ibidem*: 185).

In her quest for the reconciliation of different stances of otherness, Laila Halaby interweaves in her narration the languages, the narrative processes, and the mythologies of the two cultures of which she is the product, thus forming part of a postcolonial tradition of minority writing. Her work echoes the hybridization of the English language by Chicana authors such as Sandra Cisneros or Gloria Anzalda and the narrative techniques of Leslie Marmon Silko, for example, who uses the characters of traditional Amerindian folklore to showcase better the characters' interconnections between his community and the American cultural majority. Halaby juxtaposes Arabic folklore and mythology with the tradition of the Western fairy tale in order to bring East and West together, to make them talk instead of opposing them. As its title suggests, *Once in a Promised Land* plays with fairy tale conventions in which the state of Arizona symbolizes an Eldorado for a young couple of Jordanian immigrants, this Promised Land they came to tread. Taken in their quest for success, they face obstacles in their way: September 11, suspicions, racism, accident, miscarriage, adultery, etc. They struggle to make their life a fairy tale, but, as we have seen, it will prove illusory; the very last sentences of the novel confirming this failure, deconstruct the myth of the American Dream: "'Happily ever after' happens only in American fairy tales. *Wasn't this an American fairy tale?* It was, and it wasn't" (*Ibidem*: 335).

Among all the repercussions induced by the 9/11 attacks on the Arab-American community, it is the fantasy of inclusion promised by the American dream that Laila Halaby breaks down, pointing to its fallacious character. It shows that American culture, at the slightest jolt, identifies minority cultures as dangerous. Jassim will first experience this exclusionary experience in his relationship with his supervisor and friend, Marcus. Initially, the one who appears as the paragon of the liberal and wise man, far from the anti-Arab caricatures that appeared after 9/11, refuses to pay attention to the suspicions surrounding Jassim and defends his friend throughout the world investigation against him, despite the loss of some customers and the presence of more and more intrusive FBI within the company. However, when he learns, by someone other than Jassim, the death of the teenager, he feels betrayed

and ends up doubting his friend before siding with the popular vengeance and dismissing him. If his gesture does not seem to be related to the post-9/11 collective Arabophobic hysteria, his paternalistic, superior, even condescending attitude toward Jassim's "Muslim friend" provides an insurmountable barrier between his fantasy vision of Other and the reality of the one he has in front of him.

As for Salwa's character, it is because of his extra-marital relationship with his colleague Jake that she experiences this same rejection. Initially, he seems genuinely interested in the cultural heritage of his colleague, going so far as to learn the Arabic language and the family traditions surrounding the practice of Ramadan. However, the reader quickly learns that he is less attracted to her than to the exoticism that she embodies. She is a body to conquer, a land to colonize. Since 9/11, indeed, her "Orientalism" has become attractive:

> What baffled him was that he had never really noticed her until late in the fall, when she had glided onto his radar screen one morning, a golden apple dropped into his lap. She was lovely, with thick hair and light brown eyes that looked like they held tears. She was mature without seeming old. This mixed with her foreignness made her sophisticated. Exotic. And married. The challenge of this combination turned him on, and he wondered if all Arab women had this allure (*Ibidem*: 171).

Jake launches these racist insults slowly and distinctly, as if Salwa did not understand the English language well, to put her down to the rank of an immigrant before throwing herself on her to beat her: "She was six or seven stairs from the bottom when she felt tremendous pressure against her right shoulder blade and a push that sent her down the remaining stairs to land on the ground in a folded lump. 'Bitch! Goddam fucking Arab bitch!'" (*Ibidem*: 322).

The violence of this episode, which will send Salwa to the hospital, concludes Laila Halaby's novel dramatically, again signifying the alienation of the Haddad couple, their exclusion from the circle of belonging to the Western "we," as a metonymical example of the banishment of the Arab-American community in the essentialist world of post-9/11. Indeed, in the case of Jassim as in that of Salwa, the promise of an inclusive America, which integrates the Arab and Muslim minorities, turns out to be wrong, because the Western gaze is impregnated by a construction of the Other that does not, is never quite real, a reifying performance that excludes it, leaves it outside. The couple embodies the function of "victim emissary"; both are caught up in such a system of exclusion, whose climate of fear in the post-9/11 era is just an avatar: "Salwa knew in the marrow of her bones that wishes do not come true for Arabs in America" (*Ibidem*: 184).

In addition to the mistrust, fear, or bigotry of some, the feeling of guilt will profoundly affect the Haddad couple since both will ultimately face the futility of their own material success and the emptiness of what they believed to be their American Dream. Indeed, following a tragic car accident that resulted in the death of a young skateboarder, Evan Parker, Jassim will quickly become the target of an investigation by the FBI that will end with his dismissal, while Salwa will feel betrayed, banished by the citizens of the country in which she was born:

> Later, as she was driving home, Salwa stopped at a red light with her windows closed against the unbearable heat, which seemed like it would never, ever end. She pressed the forward scan button on the radio, searching for the station with soft rock and no commercials. A man's voice blared out: 'Is anyone fed up yet? Is anyone sick of nothing being done about all those Arab terrorists? In the name of Jesus Christ! They live with us. Among us! Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us...' (*Ibidem*: 56).

This critical finding of separation between the Christian faith and the Islamic faith will then lead the reader into a double, singular, and collective reflection on post-9/11 America. Through her gallery of characters, Halaby intimates the stereotypes and misunderstandings that undermine her relationship history before using this material to denounce more general social inequalities and political and ecological disasters that are the real heart of the attacks.

Laila Halaby feeds her story with a fairy tale; it is with a history of Arab folklore. The novel opens and ends with a prologue ("Before") and an epilogue ("After") that begin in the same way, in Arabic, "kan / ya ma kan / fee qadeem az zaman":

> Kan, ya ma kan, fee qadeem az-zaman. They say there was or wasn't in olden times a story as old as life, as young as this moment, a story that is yours and mine. It happened during half a blink in the lifetime of the earth, a time when Man walked a frayed tightrope on large, broken feet over an impossible pit of his greatest fears (*Ibidem*: vii).

This well-known formulation of children in the Middle East takes the "once upon a time' from the West since it can be translated according to the author: "They say there was no place" (vii). Thus, comparing these two oral traditions gives the novel its hybrid character and openness to otherness. At the same time, its recovery in the epilogue offers a circularity to the narrative that brings it even closer to the tale. In addition, Halaby, through the voice of Salwa's grandmother, inserts a Palestinian tale for the children on six pages (*Ibidem*: 93-98) entitled "Nus Nsays." The tale narrates the victory of the young Nus Nsays on the "ghula", the equivalent of the witch of the western tales, which promises nevertheless gold and silver ("'Open up, Nus Nsays. Open up and I'll give you all my gold and

silver and money,' the ghula screamed" [*Ibidem*: 97]). This childish story in the form of a parable refers to the story of Salwa in the novel: Nus Nsays is none other than the young Salwa struggling with the temptations of the American dream symbolized by the terrible witch "ghula". However, the parable must be reversed, and while the witch is conquered in the enshrined tale, America's dream becomes a nightmare for Salwa, again suggesting that the life of the Arab-Americans is nothing like a fairy tale in this America post-11-September.

Meanwhile, the novel's epilogue is another Palestinian tale that takes the victory of the witch on the girl that even Robin/ Jassim cannot save. There is no Prince Charming ("Not a handsome prince. This ordinary man was not so handsome – above average, perhaps, but nothing of the prince-hero type" [*Ibidem*: 335]), no foiled spell: it is a cruel tale more than a fairy tale that serves here as a parable to Laila Halaby's novel.

The cultural identity of Salwa can only be fantasized since it is built on one side on an image of Jordan idealized because distant and assimilated to family comfort, on the other side on a picture of the United States built for the consumption and dream, conveyed by the export:

> Only the America that pulled at 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 (*Ibidem*: 49).

Salwa finds her place neither in life in the United States, whose artificiality explodes definitively with the attacks of September 11, 2001, nor in the life she led in Jordan, marked by an alluring attraction for America.

Conclusions

In exploring the experiences of Arab and Muslim identity in post-9/11 American fiction, this article highlights how novelists like Mohja Kahf, Diana Abu-Jaber, and Laila Halaby reflect the complexities of double-consciousness and cultural alienation. For instance, in Kahf's "The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf", the protagonist Khadra navigates a fractured sense of self, constantly negotiating between her ethnic heritage and the pressures of American assimilation, particularly in the hostile climate following the September 11 attacks. Similarly, Abu-Jaber's "Crescent" and Halaby's "Once in a Promised Land" depict Arab-American characters who, despite their efforts to integrate into American society, are ultimately redefined by external perceptions that associate their identities with suspicion, fear, and otherness.

By reworking literary forms – blending Eastern folklore, Western fairy tales, and modern postcolonial discourse – these novelists assert a new space for minority voices, reclaiming agency over the narrative of

the Arab-American experience. Kahf's and Abu-Jaber's protagonists, while grounded in their communities and traditions, challenge the limitations imposed on them by the dominant culture. Halaby, however, provides a stark critique of the illusory promises of the American Dream, shedding light on the challenges and disillusionment faced by Arab-Americans when confronted with racial and religious prejudice.

In these novels, the trope of double-consciousness expands beyond W.E.B. Du Bois's original concept, encompassing not only the internal conflict between two selves, but also a struggle for recognition and belonging in an exclusionary America. The authors' interweaving of cultural narratives and critiques of post-9/11 societal attitudes serve as influential commentaries, engaging readers in the ongoing discourse about the enduring tensions between inclusion and exclusion in contemporary America.

Ultimately, the contributions of the Arab American writers invite readers to confront the uneasy realities of identity, belonging, and representation in a world shaped by ongoing cultural, racial, and religious fault lines. By giving voice to Arab-American experiences, these writers enrich the literary landscape and challenge the boundaries of national and cultural identity in the 21st century.

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