

## Cultural Alienation and Trauma of Identity in *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel* by Laila Halaby L:Ahmed Hussein Abboud

### Abstract

*Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*, written by Laila Halaby, examines the complex experiences of Arab immigrants in the United States. Using Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theories, this paper explores the themes of cultural alienation and trauma of identity in the novel. Cultural alienation posits that colonized individuals experience a sense of dislocation and estrangement from their culture of origin as a result of the colonial process. In *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*, Salwa and Jassim, the two Arabian immigrants, experience a deep sense of cultural estrangement as they try to take in cultural characteristics into society of America. They must negotiate the complexities of being a hyphenated individual and struggle to reconcile their Arab identity with the American one. Moreover, Bhabha's theories could help find that colonialism leaves behind lots of psychological scars that continue to affect the lives of colonized individuals long after the colonial period. The trauma of identity is evident in the experiences of Arab Americans in the novel, especially after 9/11. The hostile environment created by xenophobia and racism also affects the way that Arab Americans view their sense of belonging and the validity of their cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Cultural Alienation, Homi K. Bhabha, Postcolonial Theory, Trauma of Identity

الاغتراب الثقافي وصدمة الهوية في رواية "مرة في أرض الميعاد" للكاتبة ليلي حلبى  
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### المخلص

تتناول رواية "مرة في أرض الميعاد" للكاتبة ليلي حلبى التجارب المعقدة التي عاشها المهاجرون العرب في الولايات المتحدة. وباستخدام نظريات هومي ك. بهابها لما بعد الاستعمار، تستكشف هذه الورقة موضوعات الاغتراب الثقافي وصدمة الهوية في الرواية. يفترض الاغتراب الثقافي أن الأفراد المستعمرين يعانون من شعور بالانفصال والغربة عن ثقافتهم الأصلية نتيجة للعملية الاستعمارية. في رواية "مرة في أرض الميعاد" للكاتبة ليلي حلبى، تعاني سلوى وجاسم، المهاجران العربيان، من شعور عميق بالاغتراب الثقافي أثناء محاولتهما استيعاب الخصائص الثقافية في المجتمع الأمريكي. يجب عليهما التغلب على تعقيدات كونهما فردين مزدوجين والنضال من أجل التوفيق بين هويتهم العربية والهوية الأمريكية. وعلاوة على ذلك، قد تساعد نظريات بابا في اكتشاف أن الاستعمار يخلف وراءه الكثير من الندوب النفسية التي تستمر في التأثير على حياة الأفراد المستعمرين لفترة طويلة بعد الفترة الاستعمارية. إن صدمة الهوية واضحة في تجارب الأميركيين العرب في الرواية، وخاصة بعد أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر. كما تؤثر البيئة العدائية التي خلقتها كراهية الأجانب والعنصرية على الطريقة التي ينظر بها الأميركيون العرب إلى شعورهم بالانتماء وصلاحيات هويتهم الثقافية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاغتراب الثقافي، هومي ك. بابا، نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار، صدمة الهوية

## 1. Introduction

*Once in a Promised Land: A Novel* (2007), question at issue, explores the complexities of the postcolonial experience of Arabs in the United States. The story is about two Arab immigrants, Jassim and Salwa, who move to Arizona with aspirations for a better life. They both work hard to integrate into American society and find success in their careers. The novel is significant in the realm of postcolonial studies because it highlights the tension and contradictions that arise from trying to assimilate into a society that is hostile towards minority groups. Halaby examines the effects of colonialism on identity formation and how it shapes the experiences of Arab immigrants in America. She also critiques the homogenizing effect of assimilation that erases cultural differences in the name of conformity and acceptance. Halaby (2007) introduces her characters in the following way:

Our story takes place in the provincial American town of Tucson, Arizona, a locale with weather and potential (and very little water). 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. (pp. vii-viii)

Furthermore, the novel sheds light on the experience of Arab live in America in the consequence of 9/11 and the rise of Islamophobia. It investigates how systemic racism and xenophobia intersect to create a hostile environment for Arab immigrants and how that impacts their sense of identity and belonging. In sum, *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel* by Laila Halaby is an important postcolonial text that explores the multifaceted experiences of Arab Americans. It shows how the legacy of colonialism continues to affect the lives of immigrants from colonized countries and highlights the need for greater understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

This section is going to provide the readers with a review of literature related to Laila Halaby's work, *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*, as the subject of this study. The significance of the review of literature in this paper lies in its establishing the implication and relevance of my research. It also helps to realize what research has already been done in this area by allowing the researcher to see what kinds of theories, methodologies, and findings have been developed and recognize any gaps in the current research.

## 2.1. On *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel* by Laila Halaby

"Negotiating Un-Belonging in Arab-American Writing: Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*" (2014) by Valassopoulos explores the main ideas of identity and belonging in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*. The novel chronicles the lives of Jassim and Salwa, an American couple of Palestinian descent, living in Arizona, and their struggles with cultural and social dislocation. It is argued in this paper that Halaby's depiction of the characters' experiences highlights the challenges Arab Americans face in negotiating their identities, individualities and sense of place in American society.

Jassim and Salwa's experiences of negotiating their Arab and American identities, as well as their experiences of social exclusion, prejudice and discrimination, demonstrate the complexity of Arab American experiences. Through the characterization and narrative, Halaby deconstructs stereotypical portrayals of Arab Americans as homogenous and foreign, emphasizing the diversity and complexity of their experiences. Valassopoulos argues that Halaby's novel is significant in bringing attention to the political and social realities that impact the lives of Arabs who dwell in United States and the importance of acknowledging and celebrating diverse cultural identities.

In conformity with "Broken Promises in a 'Promised Land': Race and Citizenship after 9/11 in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*" (2014) by Bhat, Laila Halaby in his novel explores themes of race, citizenship, and identity in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The book tells the tale of Jassim and Salwa, working and living in America. The couple faces discrimination and prejudice in the wake of 9/11, as their Arab heritage makes them the target of suspicion and mistrust from their coworkers, neighbors, and the wider community. The novel's title is a reference to the United States as a promised land where immigrants come seeking a better life. However, the paper argues that this promise is broken for many Arab Americans, who find themselves treated as second-class citizens because of their race and religion.

The novel highlights the contradictions between the American ideal of equal opportunity and the reality of systemic discrimination and prejudice that many people face. Halaby's writing is notable for its empathetic portrayal of Arab-American experiences, giving voice to people who are often marginalized or silenced by mainstream media and popular culture. Through the main characters, the novel seeks to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about Arab Americans, showing that they are not one-dimensional or homogenous, but complex individuals with their own dreams, desires, and struggles.

*A Quest for Hyphenated Identities: The Arab-American Experience in Laila Halaby's Once in a Promised Land* (2020) by Younes and Ismail argues that in *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*, the experience of Arab immigrants to America is explored through characters who are searching for a sense of identity that reconciles their Arab heritage with their American citizenship. The novel presents the idea of "hyphenated identities," where individuals feel a connection to multiple cultures and identities, and seek to integrate those various aspects into a unified sense of self. This theme is central to the novel and is exemplified through the characters of Jassim and Salwa.

In this thesis, it is discussed that Halaby's novel is an exploration of the challenges and opportunities that come with creating a hyphenated identity as an Arab American. The thesis suggests that the novel portrays the struggle to reconcile the often conflicting cultural and religious traditions of Arab heritage with the democratic and liberal values of American citizenship. The novel shows how Jassim and Salwa confront the challenges of navigating their hyphenated identities within a culture that does not always accept or understand their heritage. The characters' struggles reflect the broader experiences of many Arab Americans who seek to integrate their cultural and religious traditions with the democratic values and opportunities of the United States.

## **2.2. On Postcolonial Theory of Homi K. Bhabha**

Among the most significant postcolonial theorists, Homi K. Bhabha (born 1949) is viewed as the initiator of some substantial ideas and concepts including hybridity, mimicry, difference, and ambivalence with the purpose of discussing the methods in which colonial communities have resisted the colonizer's authority and power. Bhabha has recurrently resisted the idea that all postcolonial nations belong to a single, comparable group around which stereotypes can be perpetuated.

Nevertheless, Bhabha's concepts are more utterly inspired by post-structuralism, most particularly the studies of Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault. His studies are mainly significant because of their attention to such issues as ambivalence and also founding a more systematic understanding of colonial regulation (McEwan, 2018, p. 77). This issue has brought about rejuvenating the contemporary circumstances.

Originally from Bombay, Bhabha studied primarily at British universities before relocating to Harvard and the Universities of Chicago. In the examination of colonial, postcolonial, and globalized domains, Bhabha has been an astounding thinker, having revolutionized the area of "psychoanalytic and post-structuralist" theoretician studies. (Huddart, 2006). Bhabha's main

obsession has been articulating how colonialism lingers up to the present time with its enduring effects.

The *Location of Culture* (1994) by this Indian professor is among the most important texts on postcolonialism. This book suggests that colonialism had a profound impact on culture and identity around the globe and was more than just a commercial, military, or political event. Bhabha has a strong obsession with issues of social action and identity. He has also provided his readers with an operative theory of cultural hybridity. Likewise, he has employed concepts such as mimicry, gap, and hybridity to imply that cultural production is always most prolific where it is most indecisive.

Because of his appreciation of post-structuralist thinkers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, Bhabha is seen as a pivotal player in the growth and evolution of postcolonial studies. One of the primary points concerning Said and Bhabha is how well Bhabha's contributions align with Said's goals and agenda, since both Bhabha and Said have taken advantage of a slightly inspiring sequence of hypothetical references. In order to challenge the colonial framework of binary oppositions, Bhabha has drawn on Fanon's research to construct concepts like mimicry and hybridity. This suggests that cultures interact, violate, and alter one another in far more complex ways than binary oppositions permit (McEwan, 2018, p. 79).

One of the notable studies about mimicry is "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" (1984). As stated by Bhabha (1984), the effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is bottomless and distressing. Actually, The illusion of "post-Enlightenment civility" pushes away its own language of agreement and creates another manifestation of its goals in "normalizing" the colonial state or subject (p. 126).

### 3. Statement of the Problem

Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel* illustrates the challenges faced by an Arab-American couple attempting to integrate into American society while managing their Arab identity. This study seeks to examine how Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory might be used to decipher the novel's characters' complicated experiences of cultural alienation and identity trauma, as well as how these themes mirror to broader postcolonial concerns.

Despite the fact that *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel* has been the focus of numerous study studies, there is still a gap in the understanding of how Bhabha's postcolonial theory may be specifically applied to comprehend Jassim and Salwa's hardships and struggles.

In other words, although themes of cultural identification and alienation have been discussed in earlier research, a careful analysis of Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and ambivalence might provide additional light on the subtleties of the characters' experiences and how they react to the power systems they interact with. Thus, by exploring these ideas more thoroughly, this study seeks to bridge or close this knowledge gap and acquire a greater comprehension of how postcolonial theory can help comprehend the complexities of cultural alienation and identity trauma as they are portrayed in the novel.

#### **4. Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study observes in its contribution to the perceiving of the postcolonial cosmos. Through the application of Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory, the analysis of Jassim and Salwa's experiences illuminates the nuanced ways in which cultural identification and alienation can affect people who live in several cultural contexts.

The study also emphasizes Halaby's novel's importance in examining the contradiction between a person's cultural heritage and the society they live in. Additionally, it shows how postcolonial theory is applicable to the analysis of the experiences of people and communities who have historically been influenced by colonialism and imperialism.

Likewise, the research provides insights on the relationship between trauma, identity, and power dynamics. The study deepens our understanding of the interaction between culture and power systems by examining the characters' struggles to balance their identities with the demands placed on them by outside forces.

#### **5. Methodology**

Homi K. Bhabha is a prominent scholar who has contributed significantly to the understanding and analysis of postcolonial literature and culture. His work has had a major impact on literary studies, cultural studies, and social theory. Bhabha's postcolonial theory is focused on understanding cultural hybridity, identity, and power relations in postcolonial societies. Cultural identity, according to Bhabha, is not fixed or stable, but is constantly evolving and becoming hybridized through the interaction of different cultural influences.

In postcolonial societies, cultural hybridity is evident in the mixing of different ethnic, racial, and cultural influences. Bhabha's concept of hybridity acknowledges the complexity of cultural identity and emphasizes the ways in

which cultural identities are shaped by both the dominant and the subjugated cultures. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), a major collection of Bhabha's most important works, this well-known scholar has developed a number of ideas with the aim of questioning the conventional division of the world into "self and other".

Of all these ideas, hybridity (mixing) is the most crucial since it highlights how cultures are hybrid and mixed, or even "impure." As stated by Ashcroft et al.(2013):

One of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in post-colonial theory, hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. As used in horticulture, the term refers to the cross-breeding of two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, 'hybrid' species. (p. 118)

According to this researcher, hybridity arises from the interaction between the cultural traits of a colonial power and its colony.

Then, a brand-new identity emerges that defies any specific or conventional cultural explanation.

(Meredith, 1998, p. 2). In his significant essay, "Signs Taken for Wonders" (1985), Bhabha has defined his concept of hybridization as created by colonizers by using the example of the Bible's circulation in India. He suggests that the ostensibly unchangeable "Word of God" changed as a result of Indian clarifications, explanations, and practices. (pp. 144-165). In fact, Bhabha's postcolonial theory is an influential and powerful framework for analyzing postcolonial literature and culture. It provides a complex and nuanced understanding of cultural identity, power relations, and resistance in postcolonial societies.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Cultural Alienation: Failure of Hybridity

In *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*, Laila Halaby's work cultural alienation is a recurring theme throughout the story. The novel, as noted already, revolves around the lives of two Arab immigrants, Jassim and Salwa, who move to Arizona from Jordan in pursuit of the American Dream but find it hard to belong in the new country they now call home. The couple experiences a deep sense of cultural alienation and displacement as they try to adjust to American life. One of the main causes of cultural alienation in this novel is the clash of cultures that both Jassim and Salwa feel as they struggle to balance their Arab and American identities.

Jassim's job requires him to work with American clients who have different values and cultural traditions. This often leads to communication breakdowns and misunderstandings between him and his coworkers. As a result,

he feels isolated and unappreciated at work. Salwa, on the other hand, finds it challenging to adapt to American society's norms and expectations. She struggles to maintain her Arab identity in a culture that promotes individuality and self-expression. She feels isolated from the American community and struggles with issues of identity and self-worth.

Moreover, Salwa and Jassim are more culturally alienated due to the political environment in which they live. Their American neighbors have become more hostile and suspicious of them since the 9/11 attacks.

. Their sense of marginalization and alienation is further heightened when they become the subject of racial profiling and prejudice.

Jassim says:

I have spent my entire life trying to find ways to make water safe and accessible for everyone. Just because I am an Arab, because I was raised a Muslim, you want to believe that I am capable of doing evil. It is sometimes best to look within before casting such a broad net. (Halaby, 2007, p. 232)

Laila Halaby's *novel* highlights the difficulties faced by immigrants who find themselves caught between two cultures, struggling to adapt to a new way of life while trying to maintain their cultural identities. Hybridity acts a decisive function in the cultural alienation of this novel's characters. *Once in a Promised Land* explores how cultural mixing, or hybridity, can create a sense of displacement and loss of identity in immigrants. The two main characters are caught between their Arab heritage and their newly adopted American culture, which results in a hybrid cultural identity, that is, This produces a cultural identity which is mixed and not entirely American or Arab.

. Jassim's and Salwa's experiences of hybridity leads to a sense of cultural alienation.

They feel disconnected from both their Arab roots and their American surroundings. Jassim is an architect who constructs buildings that reflect his sense of cultural identity, but he feels disconnected from the American culture he inhabits. Salwa also tries hard to connect with her new American neighbors, but her attempts are met with suspicion and misunderstanding. The novel suggests that hybridity, while potentially enriching, can also be disorienting and lead to cultural alienation.

Due to their dual identities, Jassim and Salwa find it challenging to feel like they belong in either American or Arab culture. They feel like cultural outsiders, unable to fully connect with the people around them. In *Once in a Promised Land*, Halaby portrays cultural hybridity as a complex and ambivalent

experience. While it can lead to new forms of creativity and self-expression, it can also cause feelings of confusion, displacement, and cultural alienation in individuals who are trying to navigate two distinct cultural identities. The characters' experiences of hybridity show that cultural identity is not fixed and can evolve in unexpected ways, which can result in both positive and negative outcomes.

## 6.2. Trauma of identity: Aftereffects of Colonialism

Halaby's work, *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*, also explores the theme of trauma of identity as an aftereffect of colonialism through the lives of two Arab-American protagonists, Jassim and Salwa. The novel deeply delves into the psychological impact of cultural displacement, political oppression, and social exclusion that the characters experience in America. Jassim was forced to leave his home in Jordan and start a new life with his wife, Salwa, in America after his home and job were destroyed by Israeli rockets. The couple's culturally-rooted identity and values are threatened in America, where they face discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia. According to Mashree (2017):

In her *Once in a promised Land*, Laila Halaby presents the vision of the Americans towards Islam and Muslims. The picture is drawn with fear, horror and above all pity. *Once in a Promised Land* is a post 9/11 novel that has its popularity because of tackling the event that played a very important role of the change that happened in the world. The novel presents a Jordanian couple who live in America as American citizens. They undergo certain changes after 9/11 for nothing but for their being Muslims and Arabs. (p. 93)

Moreover, they find themselves torn between their American and Arab communities, struggling to reconcile their conflicting cultural values. The trauma of identity is in fact a recurring theme in this novel, as Jassim and Salwa face an identity crisis. Jassim, who feels like a foreigner in America, tries to distance himself from his Arab roots by adopting American habits and manners. However, he finds himself alienated from both communities, feeling like he does not belong anywhere. Meanwhile, Salwa fights to maintain her Arab identity in a nation that discriminates against her because she refuses to fully integrate into American culture.. Halaby (2007) writes:

Salwa had talked to her friend Randa several times as well, babbling about how horrible it was and how she feared for the repercussion toward Arabs in this country. "Randa is worried about her kids, thinks someone might try to hurt them," she told him later. "Why would anyone hurt Randa's kids? People are not so ignorant as to take revenge on a Lebanese family for the act of a few extremist Saudis who destroyed those buildings." He had promptly been proved wrong when a Sikh gas station attendant in Phoenix was killed *in retaliation*.

Salwa's outrage and sadness was immense. "What does a Sikh have to do with anything? People are stupid. *Stupid and macho*," she finished in English. (p. 21)

The effects of colonialism are also palpable in Halaby's *Novel*. As Jassim and Salwa steer their novel life in United States, they confront the realities of colonialism, both cultural and economic. The novel explores how colonialism creates power imbalances and feeds into social and economic inequality. In sum, the novel is an insightful exploration of the psychological impact of cultural displacement and colonialism. Through the lives of Jassim and Salwa, the novel highlights the struggle of Arab Americans to preserve their cultural identity in USA and navigate the complexities of life as immigrants in a country that perpetuates colonial relations.

## 7. Conclusion

Using Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory in analyzing Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*, I can conclude that the novel is concerned with the cultural alienation and trauma of identity experienced by Arab Americans. Bhabha's theory emphasizes that idea that colonialism is not just about the enforced domination of one culture over another but also involves the production of hybrid cultural identities that have emerged from this complex relationship. These hybrid identities are often marked by ambivalence, anxiety, and a sense of dislocation.

In Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*, the two main characters, Salwa and Jassim, embody this hybridity. They are Arab Americans living in Arizona, who are struggling to reconcile their Arab heritage with their American identity. Through these two characters, Halaby is able to expose the struggles faced by Arab Americans in the post-9/11 era. The trauma of identity they face is caused by societal stereotypes and prejudice, and their own internal struggle to find a place where they belong. The culture they come from is not fully accepted in either the United States or the Arab world.

This hybridity places them in an in-between space, which Bhabha calls the third space. In sum, by using Bhabha's theory to analyze *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*, it can be concluded that the novel exposes the impact of cultural alienation and trauma of identity on individuals who have grown up between two different cultures. These individuals are torn between two identities and the struggle to fit into either space.

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