

Surrendering to the Discourse of Representation in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*

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Abstract: This paper explores the effects of the discourse of representation on the cultural identity of the protagonist Jassim in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* by making specific reference to Stuart Hall's notion "The Discourse of Representation." Michel Foucault's theory of power/ knowledge is also significant to reveal the hegemonic power of discourse in a certain culture. Besides Hall's and Foucault's theories, this article draws upon the works of some other theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Louis Althusser, and Antonio Gramsci. The study explains how the primary role of power produces a certain discourse that normalizes the individual. The personal options and experiences of the main character will be scrutinized in order to explain how Jassim ultimately surrenders to the discourse of representation.

Keywords: Arab American, cultural identity, discourse of representation, intellectual, multicultural society

1. Introduction and theoretical background

Once in a Promised Land depicts the journey of the immigrant that possesses two souls each trying to prevail; this challenge is deepened by the racist attitudes towards the immigrant within the multicultural society as presented in *Once in a Promised Land*. The traumatic effect of not being able to belong because of the limits that are set against the immigrant by the hosting society is presented in this novel. *Once in a Promised Land* is a celebrated novel by critics because it excels in describing the suffering of the minority in the post-9/11 world. Richard Gray (2011:116) presents *Once in a Promised Land* as an example of the minor literature that challenges the narration of American innocence in that time period: "*Once in a Promised Land*, as its title implies, plays with the conventions of a fairy tale. It also tries to show how apparently distant political events can disrupt normalcy, even the most serene and suburban of personal and domestic lives"; Gray argues that the need for a fairy tale happy ending in *Once in a Promised Land* is to challenge the political and resolve the personal.

Moreover, *Once in a Promised Land* gains importance for being reflective of the feelings of the Arab writer towards 9/11. According to Ines Karoui (2011:202-3), Halaby sets the framework of her novel and narrative within the tradition of

American ethnic discourse, stressing that the task of Arab-American authors is to show the complexity of the identity crisis during the period of post-9/11.

Dana Olwan (2009:214-16), on the other hand, argues that *Once in a Promised Land* is a "counter-narrative" for "the hegemonic and dominant narrative of 9/11." Olwan singles out the novel as "the only Arab-American novel about 9/11." This argument conforms to Halaby's committed attitude towards the suffering of marginalized individuals faced with a dominant narrative:

I have always believed that if other people could see my world, could see a Palestinian, Arab, or Muslim family/person/story, from the inside, then they couldn't have such ridiculous and negative stereotypes ...I do believe that it is my responsibility to offer an honest and challenging story. *Once in a Promised Land* is my offering. (qtd. in Olwan 2009: 217)

Once in a Promised Land is about a young Muslim Jordanian couple living the American Dream in Arizona. Jassim is an ambitious hydrologist who is married to the young banker Salwa. It is a highly poetic novel, narrated by a storyteller who warns the reader to avoid judging the characters through stereotypes and prejudice: "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" (Halaby 2007:2). From the beginning, the omniscient narrator foreshadows the journey of the Jordanian couple. The title implies a poetic vision critical of the land promised in American Dream; *Once in a Promised Land* reflects the need to challenge the equation of how the political affects the personal.

This study focuses on the effects of the discourse of representation on the cultural identity of the protagonist Jassim. The effect of internalizing the discourse of representation and the failure of activism is explored in this study. Studying the personal options and experiences of Jassim are of great importance to understand why he surrenders to the discourse of representation. This is possible through exploring the discourse of power and consumerism that constructs the subjectivity of the individual in the United States pre- post 9/11. This paper explores the effects of the discourse of representation on the cultural identity of the protagonist Jassim in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* by making reference to Stuart Hall's notion "The Discourse of Representation". Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge is also significant to reveal the hegemonic power of discourse in a certain culture. This article draws upon the works of some other theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Louis Althusser, and Antonio Gramsci. Culture shapes the identity of Jassim in a divisive way, as Jassim lives in pre as well as post 9/11 America, and Jassim, ultimately is unable to belong to neither the American culture, not his own original culture.

In "Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices," Stuart Hall studies representation as a system of normalization and subjugation. Hall then moves to talk about how, in at different historical moments, some people have the power to talk about certain subjects more than others. He studies the model of representation based on Foucault, who "focused on the production of knowledge rather than just meaning" through studying discourse (Hall 1997:42). Foucault's project was to indicate "how human beings understand themselves in...culture"

(Hall 1997:43). Hall relies on Foucault's notion, focusing on the study of culture in a historical context. Moreover, he presents the primary role of power that produces certain discourse which normalizes the individual. It is essential to study the discourse of racism in representation to comprehend its effect on the Arab-American immigrant in the aftermath of 9/11. Studying the practices that set the Arabs, South Asians, and Muslims as “the other” sheds light on the unjust discourse of representation.

Racist discourse precedes 9/11 and was often criticized; one such critic is Anne Philips (2007), who addresses multiculturalism based on a concept of difference and separatism between different groups through insisting on rigidity of culture and the impossibility of improving it. Philips is critical of the argument opposing the fact that cultures borrow from each other. She explains the importance of paying attention to the economic and political factors behind certain cultural practices.

2. Discussion

Once in a Promised Land presents the contradiction within the American society that is based on a culture of difference. This is seen through Jassim's experiences with American people before the attacks. For example, at swimming practice, and regardless of both men wearing Speedo and having equal backgrounds, Jack Franks, an American, ignores Jassim's class and profession, his first-ever question to him concerning ethnicity: “You Iranian?”. Additionally, Jassim is an atheist; however, this aspect of his identity is ignored by his American colleagues and social peers. Jassim's encounter with Franks further illustrates how evaluations of “the other” are based on ethnic stereotypes. Franks asks Jassim about his Arab wife: “She veiled?” (Halaby 2007:6). Franks directly associates Arabic identity with the Islamic religion, evoking certain signs immediately linked to Islam in the West.

Concerning the image of Islam in the west, Deepa Kumar (2012:1) states that the conflict between the West and Islam is not a religious conflict, but rather a historical one, due to “[c]onflict born of political rivalries and competing agendas.” Kumar states that there are persistent Orientalist myths which control the mentality of the West and that act against Muslims; she studies the historical relationship between Islam and the West, showing how the latter started creating myths against the religion for reasons of political propaganda. The Middle Ages saw the West consider Islam as a threat, linked to violence; this was at Islam's peak (Kumar 2012:12). These myths are codes which remain representative of Muslims in American culture. Kumar criticizes the role of American politicians and media that do not challenge negative images about Islam, but rather heighten it through promoting these images. These negative images were not the direct result of the events of 9/11, but rather persistent images with historical roots (Kumar 2012:42). To illustrate this, Jack Franks describes Arab women by saying: “I'm just amazed by the beauty of the women there. Incredible. The hair, the eyes. No wonder you fellas cover them up” (Halaby 2007:7). This example shows that Arab women are represented as helpless individuals, controlled by men. Indeed, one myth still used against the Islamic religion claims that this religion is a sexist one (Kumar 2012:

44). Muslim women are viewed as submissive, passive, and subjugated by dominant Muslim males.

The differentiation between the citizens based on stereotypes related to their religion shows a contradiction with the meaning of citizenship. From this vantage point, Deborah Jill Schildkraut's (2005) exploration of the contradiction within American identity and the civic myths that constitute its core becomes clarified. The civic myth of incorporationism, which proclaims immigrant rights, becomes secondary to the ethnocultural concept that considers the descendent from a white protestant origin a true American. The contradiction within the American identity components reflects a contradiction with the practices of the multicultural society. This contradiction is discussed by Phillips (2007:14) who explains:

Multiculturalism considers itself the route to a more tolerant and inclusive society because it recognizes that there is a diversity of cultures, and rejects the assimilation of these into the cultural traditions of dominant group. Much recent literature claims that this exaggerates the internal unity of cultures, solidifies differences that are currently more fluid, and makes people from other cultures more exotic and distinct than they really are.

The immigrant is threatened because of multiculturalism in a society that asserts a culture of difference, alienating the individual. Additionally, Homi Bhabha (1996:55) criticizes "multiculturalism" based on cultural differences instead of cultural diversity:

Multiculturalism has itself become a 'floating signifier' whose enigma lies in itself than in the discursive uses of it to mark social process where differentiation and condition seem to happen almost synchronically. To critique the terms in this widely contested, even contradictory terrain one needs to do more than demonstrate the logical inconsistencies of the liberal position when faced with racist beliefs.

The discrimination between individuals based on racial profiling is a negative practice by a society that claims to protect equality among its citizens. Bhabha (1996:55) criticizes the racist practices that differentiate between "the true national" who remains invisible but could be inferred from the visibility of "false nationals" such as Jews, immigrants, and natives. Further, he argues against a culture that doesn't celebrate the diversity which forms it. Accordingly, Bhabha's criticism marks the struggle of immigrants throughout the history of American multicultural society. Minorities have tried to achieve justice through opposition to practices and claims that deprive them of acting as true American citizens.

Halaby writes about 9/11—the event that has deepened the rift within the American society. This event has treated Arabs, South Asians, and Muslims as possible suspects being represented as violent terrorists. Nadine Naber (2008:1) explains that Arabs used to be considered the most invisible individuals in the ethnic and racial discourse within the United States. She proposes that Arabs are believed to be white within the ethnic and racial schemas of the United States but remain treated as inferior.

After the attacks of September 11, Arabs, South Asians, and Muslims turned out to be a signifier for "the non-white otherness." Naber suggests that "Islamic

fundamentalism” is a term influenced by “racialization of Muslims” through the discourse of Eurocentric notion. Based on that, Arabs, South Asians, and Muslims once considered “invisible citizens” became “visible subjects” (Naber 2008:2). The term “visible” is double-edged, as the individual becomes the subject of hate crimes. Many campaigns were held to raise awareness about the issue, but the federal government continued to target Arabs, South Asians, and Muslims (Naber 2008: 2). The controversial media converges painting a binary the ‘bad Muslims’ and ‘good Muslims’, where, and unless proved to be ‘good’, the majority were ‘bad’. The relationship between Islamophobia and race is a wronged connection that shows the mismatch between religion and race (Naber 2008:5). Salwa warns Jassim about possible abuse towards Arabs, fearing attacks from "macho" racists:

Macho...It doesn't matter to them if they get the people who did whatever it is that they are angry about, just as long as they've done something large and loud. I hate to think what sort of retaliation there is going to be on a governmental level for what happened. Jassim, it's not going to be easy, especially for you. (Halaby 2007:21)

Jassim's Arabic features were used against him in the post 9/11 era. His ethnicity was a sign that presented him as a fanatical Muslim asserting the mismatch between religion and race as showed in the racist attitudes of his colleagues. Additionally, “the interlinking of Islam and multiculturalism” is asserted through signs of racism against Muslims reflected in acts of intolerance (Kalin 2011: 4). Ibrahim Kalin declares that: “Islamophobia did not suddenly come into being after the events of 9/11.” Islamophobia is reflected in the unjust representation of Muslims that keeps recurring in media and the social prejudice towards them. Jassim maintains a composed stance different from Salwa's defensive attitude. When Salwa tells Jassim that Randa is scared that someone might hurt her children, Jassim refuses to accept this attitude, thinking: "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" (Halaby 2007:21). Jassim believes that the people are not racist, believing they will differentiate between the terrorists and Arabs, South Asians, and Muslims. His hope is misplaced: "He had promptly been proved wrong when a Sikh gas station attendant in Phoenix was killed in retaliation" (Halaby 2007:21).

Jassim suffers under the discourse of Islamophobia within a racialized post-9/11 system. The representation of Muslims as terrorists has a great effect on Jassim's cultural identity, even though he is a respectful professor who was hurt for the tragedy of those who died in the attacks of 9/11. Jassim is reported to mall security by a young cashier suspicious of his Arabic appearance; the cashier justifies her reaction since her uncle died in the attacks, and that she was urged by Mall management to report any suspected persons (Halaby 2007:29-30). Salwa criticizes this response, saying: “Are you planning to have every Arab arrested now?”

The racialized discourse and Islamophobia stress the culture of difference. The misrepresentation the individuals deprives them of the ability to express their

true identity. The effect of power on Jassim's identity is presented in Hall's concept that explains the factor of difference in forming it:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formation and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the making of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity. (Hall 1996:4)

Hall adds that identity is always produced "through not outside difference" and it is constructed in relation to what is not "in relation to the Other." Therefore, the effect of representation through the discourse of racism and Islamophobia becomes apparent on Jassim's cultural identity: "Identity is always in part narrative, always in part a kind of representation. It is always within representation" (Hall 1997: 49). It is important to remember Foucault's (1980:96) statement regarding the invisibility and neutrality of the techniques of power that dominate social structure and construct the individual. The political overlaps with the personal in *Once in a Promised Land*; Jassim and Salwa's weaknesses, differences, and dishonesty to each other intersect with the discourse of power pre- and post-9/11 in ways that change their cultural identity. Jassim starts to lose control over his life. His job as a hydrologist becomes the focus of people who were afraid of terrorist acts that might poison their water: "Since Tuesday, his usually predictable job had been the focus of panicked people anticipating bombs and poison in their water supply" (Halaby 2007:24). Jassim's colleagues ignore his professionalism and dedication, and put him under surveillance due to his ethnicity. His personal life, too, is affected by the kind of American patriotism encouraged by the discourse on the War on Terror. Franks, for example, decides to spy on Jassim: "My number one duty is to help protect my country. The president said that specifically, that it is our job to be on the alert for suspicious behavior, to help the police" (Halaby 2007:173).

The discourse of power constructs people's understanding of different signs. In *Once in a Promised Land*, people react against minorities based on the dynamic and content of that discourse. Foucault (1980:93) notes that power is not imposed through a hierarchal system, but rather circulated within society:

In a society such as ours...there are manifold, relations of, power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association.

It is important to study the effect of media and political discourse to properly comprehend the factors affecting cultural identity. The War on Terror presented Muslims as violent fanatics and caused them to become the target of FBI investigations and the racial hatred. Juan Cole (2011:127) states that President Bush's administration used Islam as a card to launch its War on Terror; when public

opinion was turning against the Republican Party in 2006, Bush redefined the enemy as "Islamic fascism." The term "Islamic fascism" criticizes Islamic values and the core of the Islamic religion; Cole believes that "fascist" should be used to describe an individual, not Islam which is a universal religion whose character is antifascist. This foreign policy affected the relation between the United States and the Muslim world.

For example, Salwa, trying to listen to music on the radio and she feels annoyed because the station stresses Bush Administration's propaganda: "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! Muslims who are just wanting to attack us" (Halaby 2007:56). Penny, a simple waitress who absorbs Bush Administration propaganda, wishes she could bomb the Arab world in order to kill all terrorists (Halaby 2007: 281). Penny is influenced to the extent that "each time the president spoke about the War on Terror she was outraged, sickened that there were people so sinister that they would want to harm innocent Americans" (Halaby 2007:280). Penny feels proud when the President declares that America is bringing democracy to places that have only known tyranny and wishes she were younger to actively participate (Halaby 2007:280).

The media helps to affirm the political propaganda by creating certain stereotypes that are not based on reality, but that is useful to justify certain policies. Accordingly, Louis Althusser (2001:345) studies the effect of the "ideological state apparatuses" such as school, church, media, family, and culture that operate in the private sphere and form the accepted rules in society. Indeed, Althusser studies the structure of the society in order to figure the aspects of consent that construct the subject through ideology and that is reflected through the accepted practice. The "ideological state apparatuses" is protected by "repressive state apparatus" such as the army and the prison which ensure applying the rules in the society. Althusser shows that these institutions are not unified, and they achieve their power not through coercion but through consent that is attained through the admitted applications of the rules. Althusser's idea of interpellation asserts that the subject is produced by the social forces rather than having a self-productive identity. Hence, asserting the power of consent is obvious through studying the acts of the characters in the novel. Marcus, the educated individual, reacted against his friend and colleague Jassim based on the fear accumulated by the political propaganda that established the discourse of "either with or against".

The social dominance of a certain ideology operates through the cultural institutions, as argued by Althusser. In fact, the role of the cultural institutions that produce certain ideologies based on Althusser's notion becomes prior to the economic factors. Althusser (2001:1350) defines ideology as "a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" Further, Althusser shows that the subject submits to the authority through the prevailing ideology.

Through "ideological state apparatuses," the discourse of American patriotism that defines the 'self' against the 'other' prevails in the post-9/11 world. The patriotic attitude announcing 'the true national' as suggested by Bhabha against

the sinister terrorist (identified as Arabs, South Asians, and Muslims) threatens the existence of minorities. American patriotism starts to suffocate Jassim and Salwa with its threatening message. Salwa's colleague Joan encourages her to put an American flag decal on both her and her husband's cars as protection from racism, a declaration of her position regarding 9/11 (Halaby 2007:55). The effect of this patriotic attitude adds distance between the couple: "Salwa knew in the marrow of her bones that wishes don't come true for Arabs in America...It was not just her lie that had brought distance between her and her husband and surrounded them with tension, it was the patriotic breathing of those around them. American flags waving, pale hands willing them to go home or agree" (Halaby 2007:185).

Notably, the notion of difference is what controls the discourse of racism. The patriotic attitude post-9/11 was confirmed by excluding the other. The Americans were asserting their innocence by pointing to the violence of the other. Hall (1997: 49) explains while studying the racist attitude of the British society towards the blacks: "There is no English history without that other history. The notion that identity has to do with people that look the same, feel the same, call themselves the same, is nonsense. As a process, as a narrative, as a discourse, it is always told from the position of the Other." Indeed, Hall's study about the suffering of the blacks facing the unjust discourse of representation is the primary model to study the suffering of the minorities as a category facing prejudice from the majority.

The racist behavior towards Jassim in the wake of 9/11 forces him to reconsider the reality of American society; he wonders: "vaguely if the distant attitude on the part of the city workers and the office girl was American racism. It seemed like a giant misunderstanding. Being hated outwardly would have been so much easier than this dancing around people's words and complaints and trying to figure out what they really meant" (Halaby 2007:234). Amanda Lloyd (2014:23) argues that Halaby is reversing Orientalist discourse portraying Muslims as fanatics by showing that American society is "conspiratorial and inundated with religious zealotry." On the personal level, Jassim's realization that his wife has miscarried without informing him about her pregnancy renders him unable to resume his ordinary life. Jassim's misfortunes accumulate when Jassim runs over a teenager in his car, causing his death. Unintentional accidents are misinterpreted in the post-9/11 world; Salwa tells her husband that this accident matters to the FBI because of Jassim's ethnicity, criticizing an unjust United States' legal system which strips away basic human rights:

If we had been home and you had hit that boy, his family would have gotten involved from the beginning. Here, no one cared until they found out who you were, and now they've made it grounds for federal investigation. It's crazy they are not looking at who you are as a person, at all the great work you've done. They're looking at the fact that you're an Arab. (Halaby 2007:301)

Georgiana Banita (2010:251) studies the relationship between racial profiling, paranoia, and risk in discourse related to the War on Terror. She quotes the anthropologist Mary Douglas and sociologist Aaron Wildavsky, who define risk

as “a social construct emerging from the prevailing subjective consciousness of a society rather than as a reflection of objectively verifiable danger,” risk resulting from paranoia and social insecurity leads to racial profiling, and the treatment of minorities as guilty until proven innocent. Jassim’s accident, not condemned by local police, is the focus of an FBI investigation. Evan, Jassim’s victim, pushes himself on the car while performing dangerous skateboarding moves. Evan is a teenager with psychological instability due to his parents’ divorce; his feelings manifest in drug addiction and suicidal thoughts. Like his father, Evan is racist, and his hatred of Arabs increased in the terror following 9/11. He boasts a sticker saying: “Terrorist Hunting License” (Halaby 2007:76).

Halaby draws, in this scene, an image of terrified Americans influenced by War on Terror propaganda. Indeed, Banita (2010:251) comments on the event of the accident in *Once in a Promised Land* as she says:

Such accidents—where the distinction between the morally reprehensible “foreigner” and the victimized white American is no longer clear-cut—signal the presence of hazard even in the privacy of the domestic realm among people whose lives do not permit a neat moral categorization... Yet the consequences of these missteps are disproportionately disastrous. It is mainly as a result of racial profiling and sheer coincidence that Jassim and Salwa lose control of their lives.

Moreover, David Mutimer (2007:173) concludes that: "the discourse of the War on Terror...is extensively racialized. It has articulated its enemy as people identifiable not just by their religion, as important as that obviously is to their representation, but more particularly by their (racial) appearance."

It becomes clear during the FBI investigation that Jassim was targeted because of his background. This escalates when the investigators hint that Jassim intended to kill Evan for hating Arabs since he used to have a sticker that presents bitterness towards the terrorists. Jassim restates the difference between a terrorist and an Arab as he replies: “Having a ‘terrorist hunting license’ and hating Arabs are two very different things, Agent Fletcher” (Halaby 2007:231). The FBI is part of the “repressive state apparatuses” used to subjugate individuals post-9/11, and the situation is an example of the use of power against individuals. After 9/11, terminology such as “clash of civilizations” was used to justify wars against Muslim countries, as well as “racial profiling, detention, deportation, and torture of Arabs and Arab Americans...without evidence of criminal activity” (Naber 2008:38). Although this might not apply to all Arabs in the States, it reflects “a pattern within dominant United States’ discourses such as corporate media and federal government discourses” (Naber 2008:39). This discourse sets the Arab, once considered almost (but not quite) white, as “the other.”

Studying how certain knowledge benefits the state helps comprehend the effect of power that forms subjects through discursive practice. Foucault warns against manipulating the truth by the political regime through the use of power:

Nothing is more untenable than a political regime which is indifferent to truth; but nothing is more dangerous than a political system that claims to prescribe the truth... The task of truth telling is an endless work: respecting

it in its complexity is an obligation no power can dispense with. Unless to impose the silence of servitude. (qtd in Gordon 1997: 39-40)

Thus, the political discourse that rejected Jassim as an outsider caused his identity crisis. Jassim becomes incapable of controlling his life because of feeling stigmatized and ashamed of his origin. The rift in Jassim and Salwa's personal lives is, then, created by politics; Jassim withdraws to safety in the arms of Penny, an American waitress different from the educated wife who once represented home. Steven Salaita (2011:91) studies Jassim's motives towards Penny: "Jassim's innate attraction to Penny, then, arises from a certain feeling of alienation that he imagines Penny can satisfy. Penny's attraction to Jassim arises from the same hope, though she indicates that she is interested mainly in the lifestyle that Jassim's income might provide." Similarly, Salwa directs her love to her young colleague Jake; Jake expresses respect for her culture, giving her a sense of acceptance in an otherwise hostile environment.

Jassim consequently realizes his previous indulgence in a consumerist lifestyle which cast him as a man/machine: "[H]e and the car were one, a complex, powerful machine capable of racing on the autobahn, of speeding to the scene of any disaster, of escaping the mundane" (Halaby 2007:116). As a result, his relationship with his American identity starts to break down. After the accident, Jassim starts questioning his relationship with the English language, as he feels unable to comprehend some English expressions. Thus, the language as a tool that reflects a cultural system presents Jassim's inability to belong to the American culture. Hall (1997:21) reviews representation's semiotic roots in linguistics, showing that individuals who belong to the same culture "interpret the world in roughly similar ways...that is why 'culture' is sometimes defined in terms of shared meanings or shared conceptual maps". Hall (1997:18) elaborates that it is the role of language to translate different concepts: "Codes fix the relationships between the concepts and the signs. They stabilize meaning within different languages and cultures."

The codes make it possible to establish "the translatability between our concept and our language which enables meaning to pass from speaker to hearer and be effectively communicated within a culture. This translatability is not given by nature or whereas it is the result of a set of conventions, it fixed socially, fixed in culture" (Hall,1997:22-24). Meanings are the result of "signifying practice- a practice that produces meaning." Indeed, Jassim suspects his ability to deliver his intended meaning using the English language. Moreover, nostalgia and homesickness start to dominate his feelings as he feels more alienated in America: "Jassim went through his days in America bulldozer style, an Arab in a Mercedes...after the accident...for the first time he felt unsettled in his beloved America, vaguely longed for home, where he could nestle in the safe, predictable bosom of other Arabs" (Halaby 2007:165). Indeed, the individual's affiliation with components of identity differs for different reasons. As an example, Amin Maalouf (2003: 13-14) says, "[W]here people feel their faith is threatened, it is their religious affiliation that seems to reflect their whole religious identity." Therefore, the identity that the person defends is often based "in reverse, on that of his enemy."

Identity is a special case, and each individual is unique; however, because of prejudice, individuals are lumped under the umbrella of the same group. Consequently, the reasons that determine a person's affiliation to a certain group include the influence of others, such as family and relatives, and the influence of those who are on the other side, such as enemies (Maalouf: 2003:25). Thus, the hierarchy of the components of identity differs depending on the threat posed by the other individuals; Jassim needs his roots to protect himself from the hostility of his surroundings.

Jassim's comfort with the middle-class lifestyle suggests a need for prosperity. Jassim's journey to the United States was initially triggered by a need for knowledge that would equip him to serve his home country. However, this motive is eroded through his contact with consumerist American culture. Jassim's aversion to poverty is seen through his inability to identify with both American and Jordanian lower classes: "In one breath he was in the souq in Amman, a place he couldn't stand, for the same reason he wouldn't have liked Wal-Mart if hadn't been invited to go with Penny: too many poor people" (Halaby 2007:278). Jassim's affair shows his longing for acceptance in America: "Having Penny in the car made him feel safe, attached" (Halaby 2007:276). This becomes clearer when Jassim's past, as well as his role as an intellectual, are explored.

Hall (1996: 4) identifies cultural identity as the "collective or true self hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves' which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common." From this, Hall argues that identity is never fixed or stabilized, especially in modern times; it is, however, constructed from different discourses and practices, subject to extreme historicization and transformation. It is important to locate the question of identity within historical development that affects the character of many cultures. It is also major to examine the effect of globalization as a factor while studying the identity and the effects of 'forced' 'free' migration that is the effect of the 'post-colonial' world, as stated by Hall.

Jassim comes to the United States to become a hydrologist and activist, raising awareness of water usage. There are two major reasons which mainly shape Jassim's individual identity. The first is his uncle Abu Jalal, who tells him that water is the main reason for the struggle between Palestinians, Jordanians, and Israel. Thus, Jassim's uncle explains the need to learn water control to protect Jordan's sovereignty and independence: "Water is what will decide things, not just for us but for every citizen of the world as well" (Halaby 2007:40). Abu Jalal works to dig water from his land, despite his relatives considering the venture a waste of money; he proves them wrong when the water flows, and he turns rich and powerful. Jassim envies his uncle and wishes to be as successful; he reacts by insisting on becoming a water usage activist, aspiring to participate in the welfare of his country, and adhering to his uncle's advice. The second reason is related to Jassim's fear of swimming. Abu Fareed realizes that Jassim is afraid of the water; therefore, he throws Jassim in the water to help him overcome his hesitation (Halaby 2007:45). Jassim loses control and tries hard to get out of the water. Thus, Jassim decides to conquer his fear by learning to control his breath. This deep psychological fright

encourages Jassim to aim at achieving balance and control. He is motivated to compensate for his fear of helplessness, weakness, and poverty by gaining knowledge.

Jassim's dream, which sends him to study in the United States, is a manifestation of that feeling. But reality awaits at home; his job at the Ministry of Water Resources sees that "his ideas for improvement of existing projects were largely ignored" (Halaby 2007:62-4). He returns to the United States for a doctoral degree: "Jassim went to America a second time, still filled with dreams of saving Jordan from drought and dependency." Jassim remains after he is promised a higher salary than he might get in Jordan; in doing so, Jassim surrenders to the temptation of the American Dream and abandons his country's needs that motivated him in the first place.

Hall shows that cultural identity is based on shared roots of historical particularity, which set cultural signs. Jassim's cultural identity is constructed on the need to resolve the global struggle on water resources. Jassim belongs to the post-colonial world; his need for power motivates him to succeed, especially that the water supply of his country is threatened by Israel... Jassim's priority is to participate in securing the sovereignty of his country over its water resources through his knowledge: "From the first moment that Jassim set a foot on American desert soil for his graduate education, he had been ready, willing, and able to return to Jordan upon completion of his studies, to implement all that he would learn" (Halaby 2007:2).

Yet, Jassim's desire to become an activist is replaced by his attraction toward consumerist culture. Judith Butler (1990: 136) argues that gender is performative, constructed through power relations: "[A]cts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never can reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause." Jassim subscribes to this, achieving balance through a routine ritual of swimming and long drives in his Mercedes. Thus, Jassim adopts the luxurious aspect of the American consumerist culture, consequently ignoring his motive to protect the water of his country and to provide it for his people, as he believes.

Jassim meets Salwa in Jordan. Salwa is impressed by his lecture about water and the political struggle to control it. Ironically, Salwa is an irresponsible water user, exemplifying the profound differences between her and Jassim. Born in the United States to Palestinian parents but raised in Jordan, Salwa cannot escape the call of her place of birth. Halaby (2007:49) posits that trying to ignore the call of one's homeland is "painful and traumatic"; Salwa is attracted to a consumerist world of money and leisure, as indicated by her love of silk pajamas: "[I]t was the act of wearing pajamas such as these and what it symbolized to her: leisure. Women who wore these pajamas were rich, either in their own right or in someone else's" (Halaby 2007:47). She finds in Jassim the path she doesn't in Hassan-- a less wealthy university colleague whom she refuses to marry, reflecting on her choice: "Was this all her fault for not marrying the man she loved (had she truly loved Hassan?) and instead marrying the man who offered her the best opportunity?"

(Halaby 2007:100). Thus, Jassim and Salwa pursue a consumerist lifestyle instead of participating in raising awareness about the global water crisis.

One part of the American Dream consists of tangible ambitions related to materialistic gain, while the other is related to “the Bill of Rights (freedom from religious or political persecution)” Clark (2003: 2-5). William Clark shows that the American Dream promises success through giving equal opportunities to everyone. However, Clark argues that the American Dream has come under criticism for focusing on consumption and generating overproduction without considering the effect on infrastructure. Jean Baudrillard (1998:25) studies the modern consumerist world: “Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects. Their daily dealings are now not so much with their fellow men.”

The couple's pursuit of the American Dream is satisfying because of their class status, as their house, car, and lifestyle all conform to it: "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, each painted a muted rusty brown...Briefcase, burdens, and mail in hand, leather shoes...into an extremely cool house" (Halaby 2007:23). Baudrillard (1998:50) believes that individuals are equal in a consumerist, as all are faced with needs: “The democratic principle is then transferred from a real equality of capacities, of responsibilities, of social chances and of happiness to an equality before the Object and other *manifest* signs of social success and happiness.” Consumerist goods give the illusion of happiness.

Salwa realizes this: “America pulled and yanked on her from a very young age, forever trying to reel her in. 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” (Halaby 2007:49). But this unreal America is the one that Jassim has worked into his identity. Salwa realizes that having a baby was not part of her American Dream. Ironically, she thinks: “She had not thought to fine-tune her wishes, had just assumed that *fulfilling* would come along automatically with *American freedom*” (Halaby 2007:99). Jassim and Salwa’s marriage is based on the false value of consuming and the illusion of happiness.

On a personal level, Jassim needed to be rich and powerful; on the other hand, his cultural understanding of the Middle East created his dream of being an activist. Jassim realizes the compromise that cost him his goal of raising awareness, his time instead spent working at a private company that fired him for his ethnicity: “[T]he pains stayed put, reminded him that he had walked away from the life he had planned. That he was currently doing nothing, in real, absolute terms, to solve the water crisis or even heighten awareness. He had gotten on an amusement park ride (not a plane), whose controls had been stolen, hijacked, sending him careening into buildings” (Halaby 2007:219). This metaphor criticizes the consumerist culture and reverses the discourse of representation.

Consequently, Jassim feels lost: “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? I understand American society...I speak your language. I pay taxes to your government. I play your game. I have a right to be here. How could this be happening?" (Halaby 2007:234). The norm that structured Jassim's reality as a middle-class member transformed with the representation of Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians as a menace, violent, and terrorists. Accordingly, Jassim feels ostracized. Therefore, his inability to cling to his culture causes his crisis when he is set as an outsider by the American culture.

There are two essential contemporary definitions of intellectuals and their function. First of all, Gramsci's (2001:1002) contribution presents that "[e]very, social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political field." Thus, the intellectual becomes the voice of the oppressed class. Jassim fails to identify with the poor class and to represent their suffering. Gramsci (2001:1005) shows that the function of the organic intellectual is to give awareness. Accordingly, the function of the intellectual is not only in his field but also outside his profession "Each man, finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a 'philosopher', an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought."

While the other definition of the intellectual is proposed by Foucault (1997:33) who stresses that the role of the intellectual is to challenge power in the domain of the intellectual's special field, Foucault explains:

The work of an intellectual is not to form the political will of others; it is, through the analyses he does in his own domains, to bring assumptions and things taken for granted again into question, to shake habits, ways of acting and thinking, to dispel the familiarity of the accepted, to take the measure of rules and institutions and, starting from that re-problematization (where he plays his specific role as an intellectual) to take part in the formation of a political will (where he has his role to play as citizen).

The image of the eastern and western deserts in *Once in a Promised Land*, represented by the Jordanian deserts and the deserts of Tucson, Arizona, reminds the reader that, on issue of water, humanity is united. Jassim's endeavor to solve the water crisis represents the potential of any intellectual; he lectures about water in Jordan, showcasing intellectuals' importance in raising awareness. His speech is powerful, evidenced by Salwa's enthusiasm, making his departure from the cause all the more significant. Jassim is unable to participate in making change as an intellectual, whereas he is trapped by the discourse of representation that sets him as an inferior other.

Foucault (1980) then stresses the importance of challenging the discourse of power, which creates its own truth through the knowledge of specialized intellectuals. Based on this, Jassim, as a specific intellectual with knowledge about water and who could support the oppressed through their struggle, does not

participate in challenging the existent hegemonic power but, on the contrary, surrenders to it and loses control of his life. The productivity of power is part of social structure. Power relations constitute the subjectivity of the individual. It is not performed through repression, operating by creating new realities and forming the self-awareness and identity of the individual. The effect of power becomes apparent on Jassim's cultural identity, an atheist American citizen who nevertheless longs for balance: "I have no control...my life is no longer in my hands. This thought overpowered a quieter wish for God, for belief, for an answer, or at the very least Balance" (Halaby 2007:148). For this reason, Jassim questions his beliefs and principles on the ground of his new reality.

Jassim identifies with the representation, which mutilates a component of his cultural identity and in the process loses his true self. He expresses his helplessness to Salwa: "I was selfish to have brought you here. I realized that today. Salwa, I am so sorry. All of this is my fault for being weak, for not being able to tell you what I've done..." (Halaby 2007:327). Jassim is further doomed because of the FBI investigation. Even his religious beliefs undergo change, as he starts to search for a God to relieve him of his dilemma. Milton Gordon (1975: 84-5) suggests that the multidimensional model of the assimilation process consists of seven assimilation dimensions: cultural, structural, material, identificational, attitude receptional (absence of prejudice), behavior receptional (absence of discrimination), and civic (absence of value and power conflict); he explains that this model was presented to study the American ideology of "Anglo-conformity", the "melting pot", and "cultural Pluralism." Indeed, Jassim faced discrimination and power conflict based on Gordon's model. Thus, Jassim could not belong to the American culture. Jassim is unable to synchronize to his need for balance and power with the persecution of his ethnicity. As a result, he has lost his relationship with both his roots and the American culture that rejected him. Jassim's tragedy is clarified when he admits his helplessness in facing reality controlled by the discourse of power.

As argued by Foucault, this power constructs the social body through discourse resultant from knowledge. The question of who a real American is becomes important to reflect on a contradiction within American identity. Hall shows that challenging misrepresentation is crucial for the process of identification in order to challenge power relationships. The duty of the intellectuals is that they defy the discourse which alienates the oppressed and denies their basic human rights. *Once in a Promised Land* ends by presenting Jassim's inability to resist the discourse of power that deprived him of his career, wife, and luxurious life style.

3. Conclusion

This paper has exposed Jassim's defeat due to internalizing the representation discourse that has oppressed him. Jassim does not pursue his ambition of being an activist that raises awareness about water usage. Instead, Jassim's need for power is compensated by indulging himself in the consumerist discourse. Jassim's illusion of consumerism makes him indifferent to the collective aspect of his identity. His assimilation with the American culture does not facilitate his belonging to it, as he was treated as an outsider based on his ethnicity and religion. Jassim's weakness

stems from his inability to recall the collective culture that should empower him. Thus, Jassim surrenders to the discourse of representation that treats him as a violent terrorist causing him to feel guilty and helpless. Jassim internalizes the unjust representation; he is trapped as an outsider who neither belongs to his mother culture nor the American culture.

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