

AMERICANNES AND THE AMERICAN DREAM IN LAILA HALABY'S ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND (2007)

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Abstract

*The American Dream is associated with the promise of equality, opportunity, success, and achievement through hard work and perseverance. It promises free practice of religious, social, and cultural values of different ethnic and racial groups to “construct a new race, a new religion, a new state, a new literature” (Emerson, 1909, p. 116). Hypnotized by these values of the American Dream, immigrants from all corners of the world pour into America to achieve these ideals of happiness and prosperity. However, despite being hailed as the panacea for all, the mythical nature of the American Dream has come to be vigorously debated over the last hundred years. Indeed, the political and economic crises at the turn of the twenty-first century have further exposed the fault lines of the American Dream (Archer, 2014). While literary critiques of the materialistic nature of the Dream can be traced back to classics such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) is a contemporary exploration of the meaning of “Americanness” from the perspective of an Arab American couple in the aftermath of 9/11. Through a critical analysis of the representation of Americanness in the novel, the paper argues that the already elusive nature of the American Dream becomes further complicated in an America unsettled by 9/11; as such, rather than reinforcing their American identity, for Arab Americans, the notion of Americanness becomes a source of disillusionment and alienation.*

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The American Dream: A Brief Overview

The term “American Dream” was coined by James Truslow Adams in his pioneering book *The American Dream*, later retitled as *The Epic of America* in 1931. According to Adams, regardless of social class or circumstances of birth, all Americans have equal access to pursue what he terms their American Dream: “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (Adams & Schneiderman, 2012, p. xvi). Indeed, Adams’s work can be traced back to the origins of American history as the basic notion of the Dream finds expression in the *Declaration of Independence* that champions the “unalienable Rights” of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” for “all men” (Lucas, 1998, p. 159). This was furthered by thinkers like Tocqueville, Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau who emphasized that social status in America could be earned rather than inherited, thus rendering the Dream an assertion of meritocracy over aristocracy (Samuel, 2012, p. 3). Ownby (1999) lists four main postulates of modern-day consumerism and entrepreneurship that also characterize the American Dream: Dream of Abundance, Dream of a Democracy of Goods, Dream of Freedom of Choice, and the Dream of Novelty. This idea of a liberal and prosperous America has been the Utopia of all industrious people who migrate from around the world in search of that heavenly abode where they can freely practice their beliefs and harbour the fruit of their labour.

However, the historical trajectory of the American Dream has not been as romantic, for the dream has always been a privilege available to a select few. Since its very inception, America has been a “colour-conscious society” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 1), where race has remained the determiner of rights and freedoms. From slavery and racial segregation to the contemporary racial politics, America has struggled to offer equal fruits of the American Dream to all. An overview of the U.S. history reveals that

the groundwork for this discrimination against non-Whites was laid within the founding laws of the constitution (Higginbotham, 1980). The legalization of the slave trade in the sixteenth century; the Virginia Slave Code of 1705; the protection of slavery in the Constitution; Jim Crow Laws; and the unending African American struggle for civil rights, are some of its irrefutable facts (Montagu, pp. 98-11). As such, while W. E. B. Du Bois famously wrote that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (2007, p. xiv), in the post 9/11 period, Muslims have become “America's Latest ‘Outsiders’” (GhaneaBassiri, 2010). Arab American Muslims have been particularly dubbed as the “sand niggers” of the twenty-first century, reflective of the “centuries-old” hierarchized organization of American racial/ethnic communities (Salaita, 2006, p. 19).

Although racial categorization of Arabs as antithetical and inferior to the West is based on the Occidental-Oriental binary that Edward Said (1978) outlined and that gained momentum in the 1970s because of the growing politicization of the new immigrant Arab American community, it further intensified exponentially in the post-9/11 U.S. Indeed, the post-9/11 popular American cultural discourse portrayed Arab Americans as irrational, violent, and uncivilized; hence, a “menace to the west and to Christianity” (Majaj, 2000, pp. 324-5). Certain individual derogatory characteristics were assigned to the whole group regarding their beliefs, ethnicity, gender, physical appearance, and nationality, juxtaposed to the superior western liberal democratic self (Beller, 2007). Joyce E. King uses the term “dysconscious racism” for this tendency to consider oneself superior in social hierarchy (1991, p. 133) whereby certain “incidental characteristics” are attributed to the entire group “regardless of actual variation among members, and once formed, stereotypes are resistant to change on the basis of new information” (Beller, 2007, p. 429). Thus, the entire Arab American community came to be reviled for their alleged “backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women's rights”

(Said, 1979, p. xix)—Western principles that were the target of 9/11 attacks.

As such, in the aftermath of 9/11, Arab Americans were suddenly stripped of their Americanness simply on account of their Arab affiliation. While initial literary representations of 9/11 reinforced this very binary through its stereotypical portrayal of terrorists as Orientalist others (Updike, 2007; DeLillo, 2008; Foer, 2005), writers like Mohsin Hamid, H. M. Naqvi, and Laila Halaby, among others, have rewritten these narratives to not only relay the experiences of millions of Muslims who do not share the ideology of the extremists, but also to recount the consequences of this otherization on the lived reality of these people. Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* is one such narrative that explores the meaning of America and the American Dream for an Arab American couple after 9/11.

Literary critiques of the American Dream have focused on the material allure of the Dream that corrupts social vision by creating economic inequalities. As Matterson notes, it “supports ruthless plutocracy ... equates personal fulfilment with material gain, and ... results in a narrowly selfish definition of success” (2002, p. 10). *The Great Gatsby* is among the earliest literary critiques of the Dream that argues that rather than a guarantee of happiness, the material success of the Dream is a source of disillusionment from life. Likewise, Arthur Miller in *The Death of a Salesman* (1949) criticizes the American Dream for its hollow moral structure. Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) explores the way American Dream makes people discontented by instilling lust for accumulating wealth and high status. Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909), John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961), and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) are among other works that have explored different aspects of the Dream. *Once in a Promised Land* is, however, a contemporary, post-9//11 exploration of the American Dream.

Recent studies of the novel have focused on both the question of Arab American identity and the post-9/11 representation of Muslims (Naem 2023; Garrido 2021; Hilal 2020; Shihabudheen 2018). Regarding the American Dream, Fateh and Ilhem (2017) have conducted a comparative analysis of the novel alongside Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* from a narratological perspective to explore the relationship between the characters' deteriorating personal relationships and the demise of their Dream. Jung-suk Hwang compares "the areligious, apolitical, and assimilated Arab Americans' downfall" with those of the underprivileged Americans to "demystify" the notion of the Dream (Hwang, 2019, p. 287). While this paper develops on these arguments, it deviates from previous literature in two ways. First, while Hwang argues that Salwa and Jassim had "once achieved the American Dream" which is later problematized by 9/11, this paper argues that the American Dream had always eluded the couple even before 9/11. Secondly, while Fateh and Ilhem focus on the link between the deterioration of personal relationships and the American Dream, this paper problematizes the very meaning of Americanness for the Arab American characters.

The Myth of the American Dream

The title of the novel refers to the categorization of America as the promised land since colonial times; however, this is offset by the romantic tone of the fairy-tale in the phrase "once in a" that comments on the mythical nature of the land. Indeed, living in the promised land is like walking "a frayed tightrope on large, broken feet over an impossible pit of [the] greatest fears" (Halaby, 2007, p. vii). In the first section titled "Before", Halaby reminds us that since this tale is about Arab Americans, she must set the parameters to be followed during its reading. Like the humiliating experience of airport security checks that many Muslims faced after 9/11, "Before" lists reader prejudices associated with "turbans, burqas, or violent culture" that must be set aside before entering Halaby's fictional world: "I'm sorry, sir/ma'am, you've set off the alarm. Please step

over to the side. I need a check over here. Go ahead. I am patient. I can wait while you unpeel them all” (p. viii). Halaby’s novel thus becomes the counter-voice of Arab Muslims that is missing not only in the security checks that dehumanize them but also in the mainstream media and literature.

The novel revolves around the life of an Arab American couple, Jassim and Salwa Haddad, who migrate to the U.S. from Jordan in pursuit of their American Dream. Jassim is a hydrologist with a PhD in hydro-technology and Salwa is a banker and a part time real estate agent. The Jordanian American couple had been living a quiet, comfortable middleclass life for nine years; “only after the World Trade Center buildings [were] flattened by planes flown by Arabs” (p. viii) that their presence became conspicuous. The fact that “they have nothing to do with what happened” is both “Nothing and everything” for the people around them (p. vii-viii). Thus, both Jassim and Salwa experience individual and shared crises in their personal as well as professional lives that not only alienate them from each other but also disillusion them vis-à-vis the larger American society. While they came to the U.S. to realize their American Dream, they lose themselves as individuals and as a couple in the pursuit of the mirage.

Both Jassim and Salwa have their individual aspirations, which also bring them together. Dedicated to using his knowledge to address the water crisis at home, Jassim tried his luck with the Ministry of Water Resources in Amman after completing his masters and PhD from the U.S.; however, he failed to secure a position. Besides, “America, once tasted, is hard to spit out, with its shiny tools and machinery.” Indeed, while “Jordan pumps through the blood, America stays in the mouth” (p. 64). Thus, Jassim accepts his friend Marcus’s offer to join his firm with its “stainless steel promises of a shiny lab and possibility” (p. 63) that symbolizes his American Dream. On his visit to Jordan, however, Jassim delivers a lecture

on the importance of water conservation at the University of Jordan. Salwa, a student of accountancy, who is among the audience is “hypnotized” not only by the depth of his knowledge on the subject but also by his “Americanness” that rekindles her own Dream (p. 245). Interestingly, Salwa’s parents had also tried their luck with America after being displaced from Palestine; however, once their fourth child, Salwa, was born, they “decided that it was not worth losing our souls so we could have nice things” (p. 70), and thus moved to Jordan. Ironically named “Made in USA” or “Miss America” (p. 47), Salwa has never dissociated herself from her American connection, which is symbolized in her “taste for silk pajamas” (p. vii). Thus, in a couple of meetings with Jassim, America beacons to her, and Salwa chooses the “hydrologist from America” (p. 237) “who promised her America” (p. 37) over her first love, Hassan.

The text opens when the couple have been in the U.S. for about a decade and have managed to secure almost everything that the dream symbolizes. However, as they secure the material possessions associated with the Dream, they also come to experience the hollowness that accompanies it. Their lucrative jobs furnish their lives with all the amenities that the dream promises: a “nestled-in-the-hills home”, a “glinty Mercedes”; an office with “a spectacular view of the city” (pp. 22-24); and the luxury of affording all the “distractions” that the “pristine” American stores and malls offer (p. 101). However, none of it could “shift” the “focus” from the “emptiness” in Salwa’s “soul” (p. 101) that had crept in with their mechanical lives. Growing increasingly distant from each other, the “crevice” between Salwa and Jassim (p. 91) widened until they became “a couple whose love for each other had parched around the edges, pulled up at the corners, so that air bubbles had separated adhesive from skin” (p. vii). The hollowness of their dream is best reflected in the metaphor of “silk pajamas” that Salwa has been obsessed with since childhood; they not only symbolize “leisure” for her but also strengthen her connection with America (p. 47). Once in the U.S., she regularly adds to

her collection, buying “smaller and sexier pajamas in the hope that she would one day wake up in that Promised Land” (p. 49).

Salwa and Jassim seem to have materialized all four postulates of the Dream that Ownby outlines; however, they fail to bring happiness and personal fulfilment. Salwa is the first one to recognize the “void” in their life: “this was the life she had chosen, but it was not the life she wanted” (p. 91). She believes that the only way to fill this void is by having a “child”. However, consumed by the American culture of “show[ing] everything” yet “remain[ing] an island,” Jassim has become “a closed-up individual” (p. 54). As such, he has unconsciously sacrificed their wish for a child at the altar of a luxurious life which demands continuous, mechanical work, thereby blocking out his wife as well as her wishes. While Jassim is complacent with the conception of his family as “Alone” (p. 51), Salwa continues to look for “meaning in her life” as her “used-up dreams left her empty, wanting for something” (p. 100). Convinced that it was a connection to life in the form of a “child” that would fill the vacuum in her life, Salwa skips a few doses of her contraceptive pill to become pregnant. The official news of her pregnancy received in a flat voice from the nurse makes Salwa nostalgic and reminds her of the warmth and fulfilment of the greetings, prayers, and celebrations for the expectant mother in Jordan. Unable to share the news with Jassim fearing it might offend him, Salwa has to live with “the Lie” of her pregnancy while Jassim is engrossed in his projects, “oblivious of his wife” and his “fetus”. Thus, its eventual loss in a miscarriage shatters Salwa’s dream that she had carried from Jordan to the U.S.:

Dreams packed in a hard-shelled suitcase, dragged to America and shaken carelessly out.... Each one had been worn, lived in. Lived out. So what was left? This life was the one she had custom-ordered according to her specifications, each bullet point checked off.... She had not thought to fine

tune her wishes, had just assumed that *fulfilling* would come automatically with *American Freedom*. (p. 99)

Salwa thus realizes that “American life was deceptively full” only if “lived correctly”, which means enjoying all the material possessions in an isolated existence without human connections that gave meaning to life (p. 101). This is why the promised land of her dreams has turned out to be a mirage where her dream house is “totally empty” (p. 176). Like the ancient Arab tale of *Nus Nsays*, Salwa and Jassim’s desires have been half fulfilled. They have sacrificed their home, family, country, language, culture, and religious identity to gain material achievements, but the fallacy of the American Dream is evident in their deprivation of the spiritual enrichment which comes with familial connection, home, family, and love. Thus, even before 9/11 dramatically changes their lives, Salwa and Jassim are living half-fulfilled dreams.

Americanness, 9/11, and the Dream

While Jassim and Salwa’s American Dream is already disintegrating, the 9/11 event comes to challenge their very Americanness. It is ironic that they have endeavoured for nine long years to buy into the ideology of an American life only to be suddenly excluded from it as “crazy Mahzlims” (p. 108). As soon as the twin towers fall, Salwa and Jassim, despite their presumed Americanness, become a victim of “dysconscious racism” as all Arabs come to be perceived via the same stereotypical lens: “They live with us. Among us! Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us” (p. 56). The first instance that challenges their smug assumption of their Americanness is when Jassim is reported as a “security threat” while shopping in a mall with Salwa (p. 28). Being an Arab who “stood there and stared for a really long time” (p. 30) rendered him a threat to the young salesgirl who reported him to the police. While Jassim is still processing the incident, an enraged Salwa lodges a complaint with the store manager. This is the only occasion on which they confront their

xenophobic treatment “together”: “Salwa looped her arm through Jassim’s. For the tiniest amount of time, the Lie was distracted by the War on Terror. For that slice of an afternoon, Salwa and Jassim were how they had once been: together” (p. 32).

Although initially 9/11 bridges the distance between them as they try to resist the insanity that the prevailing political situation has engendered, soon the very event becomes a source of their further downfall. As Salwa and Jassim’s personal crises merge with their professional crises under the shadow of 9/11, they move further apart. Salwa’s crisis begins with her pregnancy and climaxes with her miscarriage; Jassim’s crisis begins with his realization of his complicity in the miscarriage and climaxes in his killing of a teenager in a road accident. Indeed, the miscarriage of his baby literally comes to confront him in the killing of the teenager that together continue to haunt him until the end. Interestingly, in the final collapse of their Dream, two white Americans, Jack and Jake with their generational prejudice against the Arabs, come to play a pivotal role.

As Salwa is reeling under the effect of her lost fetus, which has further distanced her from Jassim emotionally, physically, and sexually, Jake intrudes into her life. Salwa’s “self had gone down the drain with her blood and the invisible fetus,” and was replaced with “numbness” that had “evaporated” the “interest she had” in her “job” and her “life”. Just then, Jake, a “part-time teller, part-time college student” (p. 105) comes to fill that void in her life. A drug addict and dealer, Jake represents the worst of America that is creeping up on Salwa and threatening her ties to her family, home, and culture. As a young college-going American, Jake’s racism is different from the older generation that Jack represents. While Jack views Arabs as a potential threat, Jake is instead enamoured by the exotic media image of Arab women that is confirmed in Salwa’s mesmerizing beauty.

Jake, however, exploits the current wave of racism to strike up a friendship with Salwa.

As Jarmakani notes, the portrayal of Arab womanhood in American popular culture as the oppressed veiled creature of patriarchal domination has created an erotic fantasy of the Arab Woman (Jarmakani, 2008) that does not escape Jake. Indeed, Salwa's "Americanness"—her perfect American accent and her educational and professional competence—does not help dispel her sexual profiling as the Middle Eastern harem girl, so that an eight-year older Salwa becomes "an obsession" for Jake (p. 170): 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 (the physical one and the shadow of a man behind them) and if that was why they veiled themselves. (p. 171)

He enrolls in an Arabic class to learn the "language of opium" (p. 52) "because he desperately wanted to make love to an Arab woman and this was the best way to get to her" (p. 171). He intentionally uses Arabic greetings and cultural expressions such as "*Ma'a salaama*", "*marhaba, ana talibun*" and "*Azzeem*" (p. 127) "*Sabah al-khayr*," (p. 145), "*alhamdulillah*" (p. 146), and "*Marhaba-yajameela*" (p. 183), to increase their intimacy. This coupled with his intent queries about Muslim religious festivals like Eid and Ramadan draw Salwa in, giving rise to a conflict in her heart between the demands of her Arab values and the lure of the American culture so that "Salwa's conscience fought within her, shouted the impossibility of what she was doing" (p. 174).

When Jake invites her to his place for dinner, Salwa decides to turn him down; however, his welcome greeting "*Ahlan wa sahan*" "pushed her resolve down the stairs" (p. 206). This is followed by his serving of the Arab cultural cuisine *shumur* that "brought back home in one tiny burst ... fireworks in her mouth that took away her breath" (p. 209) so that when

Jake touches her, she is engulfed by a sea of desire and “allowed herself to vanish under the shadow of another person” (p. 210) until she “became someone new” (p. 212). However, instead of giving her the comfort that she had been seeking, her relationship with Jake becomes a source of “revulsion” especially after Jake boasts his secret sexual encounters to a colleague. Disillusioned by all that America represents, symbolized in her strained relationship with Jassim and her humiliating treatment by Jake, Salwa decides “to fly away and tuck herself into the safety of her true home” (p. 289) in Jordan, bringing an end to both her American adventure with Jassim and her American fairy-tale with Jake: “If wishes came true, she would wish that things were now as they once had been, but Salwa knew in the marrow of her bones that wishes don’t come true for Arabs in America” (p. 184).

Unlike Salwa who was immediately perturbed by the charged post-9/11 political atmosphere, Jassim has a blind faith in American pragmatism: “People are not so ignorant as to take revenge on a Lebanese family for the act of a few extremist Saudis” (p. 21). Although his social stature ticks all the boxes that qualify him as an emblem of the American Dream, his Americanness is repeatedly challenged after 9/11. From the mall episode to Jack’s uncomfortable questions about his background, the suspicious glances of the office girls, and the FBI investigation make Jassim realize that things have changed. However, like Salwa, Jassim’s personal and professional crises converge to bring about the final demise of his American Dream.

The text begins with Jassim’s alarm clock waking him up for his early “morning ritual” of swimming that accorded “Balance” to his life (p. 3). Swimming is a “ritual” which symbolizes meaning, order, and bliss in Jassim’s life, especially because it allows him quiet introspection. It is interesting, therefore, that Jack Franks comes to disrupt his quiet swimming routine on “this day that changed everything” (p. 5). As Jack starts to speak to him, Jassim “hoped that their conversation would end,”

for he “liked to start the day with silence” (p. 6). Jack, however, continues to converse with him until he begins to disturb Jassim’s “equilibrium” by first inquiring about his background and then discussing his wife. Jack’s inquiry about Jassim’s “background” shows that unlike white Americans, Jassim’s Americanness is forever in question. The encounter with Jack unsettles Jassim, for unlike other days when his swimming ritual energized him, today “his mind [was] stuck on Jack” (p. 8).

Then onwards, Jassim is unable to find “balance” in swimming as he is overpowered by the memories of the negative experiences he has had since 9/11: “Each day that Jassim had gone swimming since that fateful Tuesday when the planes hit, his mind had not cleared on entering the water” (p. 61). His inability to find peace in his morning ritual intensifies until the day he is denied access to the pool because “an adult” had “defecated” in it (p. 103). Jassim’s inability to “achiev[e] balance in the day” (p. 102) coincides with two important events on that day that change the course of his life; his discovery of Salwa’s loss of their child for which he comes to blame himself and his literal killing of another child in a car accident. Indeed, his guilt about the death of his unborn baby confronts him literally in his killing of Evans Parker. On the one hand, the guilt of having accidentally killed Evans haunts him. On the other, the construal of Evans’s killing as an intentional act of revenge by an Arab against a teenager who had racist “views” about “Arabs” derails him (p. 231): “No control. It’s gone. My life is no longer in my hands” (p. 148). While evaluating his “America bulldozer style” life (p. 165), “*for the first time he felt unsettled in his beloved America, vaguely longed for home*” (p. 165). When the FBI entertains the possibility of Jassim poisoning the city water and when Marcus fires him on related suspicions, the reality of the illusion of the American Dream that Jassim had been living finally hits him:

It made him shaky and unsettled. Unbalanced.... An axis unable to rebalance. An axis of evil.... *I understand American society*, he wanted to

scream. *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?" (p. 234).

Despite living a life of absolute professionalism that is focused on making people's lives better, Jassim feels that he has been an outsider all along. He realizes that his life thus far in America has been an illusion. He is not an American but a disposable Arab, living in America.

Thus, Salwa and Jassim's pursuit of their American dream both as individuals and as a couple culminates in tragedy. Her final, violent encounter with Jake that lands a bloodied Salwa on the hospital bed makes her realize that "the American Dream" is "all a lie.... A huge lie" that you can never materialize despite "sacrifices", a "partial loss of self", and "the signing over of the soul" (pp. 316-317). Jassim's experiences leading up to his mortifying treatment by Marcus make him realize that he had been living the myth of a Dream that had blinded him to the reality of his own life: "The past nine years (and even more than that) had been a sabbatical from real life, a rich man's escape from the real world" (p. 218). Thus, while there is no "Happily ever after" in their "American fairy-tale" at the end of the novel (p. 355), Halaby's choice of ending the text with the Arabic folklore of the *ghula* serves as a silver lining to the otherwise tragic story of Jassim and Salwa's encounter with America.

Like Alia Yunis's use of the metaphor of *Scheherazade* to relay the narrative in *The Night Counter* (2009), Halaby draws on the Arab Folklore of the *ghula* to convey the disillusionment of the American experience for Arab Americans. The *ghula* folktale appears twice in the text. The first time it is with reference to Salwa's reminiscence of her grandmother's telling of the Palestinian children's tale of Nus Nsays who is chased by the *ghula*, an Eastern version of the witch who lures him with riches in the hope of devouring him; however, Nus Nsays refuses: "I don't want gold or silver or money. I want peace for my village" (p. 97). The *ghula* thus represents the materialist existence of the Dream whereas Nus Nsays

symbolizes Palestinian roots that Salwa ignores in becoming engrossed with the simulation of the Dream. While Salwa has attained the riches, they fail to bring her peace. Halaby's return to the *ghula* at the end of the novel is a reminder for Salwa to reclaim her Palestinian roots. This second story is about a young peasant girl (Salwa) born in a foreign land where parents "labored" for their children to "change their fates" (p. 331). The *ghula* once again represents America's charm that traps the girl with "a thousand and one red threads" stitched under her skin that pull her "away from her familiar world" to devour her. This symbolic *ghula* (America) has enticed Salwa through its false hopes of the Dream. While the Clever Hassan and the nightingale (Jassim) repetitively try to rescue the girl, the *ghula* "send[s] her ghul brothers to distract" Hassan while she imprisons the nightingale until Hassan eventually manages to kill the *ghula*. The nightingale then "lifted up the unconscious and damaged maiden and carried her home across land and sea, hoping that with the proper care she would recover from her wounds" (p. 335).

While the peasant girl (Salwa) is attracted to the beautiful villa of the *ghula* with its assurance of a Promised Land to materialize her dreams, the Palestinian folk tale of Nus Nsays signifies Jassim and Salwa's cultural roots that they have lost in their entanglement with the *ghula*. Severed from the cultural identity that provides them a sense of self, their hopes and dreams turn out to be a heap of broken images. In confirming that "It was and it wasn't" an American fairy tale, Halaby, at the end of the novel, does not reject America though she reinforces the Arab cultural roots that promise a spiritual anchor that is sorely missing for the couple in an America unsettled by 9/11. Indeed, by tracing the stories of Jassim, Salwa, Jake, and Jack intermittently through free indirect discourse, Halaby outlines the personal as well as the professional struggle of all four characters. Jassim and Salwa are unable to truly realize their American Dream as much as Jake and Jack are. However, in the aftermath of 9/11, the already elusive nature of the American Dream becomes further

complicated for Jassim and Salwa who have moved apart in their pursuit of a dream that evades them. Thus, instead of reinforcing their American identity, the notion of Americanness becomes a source of disillusionment for them.

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