

**Arab-American Identity Representation  
In Leila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* and John Updike's *Terrorist***

**Abdelhaq Jniyene**

**Dissertação  
de Mestrado em Estudos Literários Norte-Americanos**

**March, 2016**

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Departamento de Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas; Secção de  
Estudos Literários Norte-Americanos

Orientadora: Prof. Doutora Teresa Botelho

March 2016

**[DECLARAÇÕES]**

**Declaro que esta dissertação é o resultado da minha investigação pessoal e independente. O seu conteúdo é original e todas as fontes consultadas estão devidamente mencionadas no texto, nas notas e na bibliografia.**

**O candidato,**

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**Lisboa, 10 de Dezembro de 2015**

**Declaro que esta Dissertação se encontra em condições de ser apreciado pelo júri a designar.**

**O orientador,**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Lisboa, 15 de Dezembro de 2015**

**To Sarah and Youssef**

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## The Plan of the Dissertation

### - Introduction:

### - Chapter I: Writing 9/11

1.1- Trends in 9/11 American literature

1.2 – Arab American Diaspora and its literature

### - Chapter II: *Terrorist* by John Updike

2.1- John Updike's cultural and cognitive perspectives

2.2- The dilemma of religious identity and ethnic categorization in Updike's  
*Terrorist*

2.3- The narrative strategy in John Updike's *Terrorist*

### - Chapter III: *Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby

3.1- Laila Halaby cultural and cognitive perspectives

3.2- The process of identity construction in Laila Halaby's *Once in Promised  
Land*

3.3- The narrative strategy in Laila Halaby's *Once in Promised Land*

### - Conclusion

## Introduction

The tragedy of 9/11 was a turning point in the life of Americans. Arab Americans were no exception; traumatized, as all other Americans, by the devastating event, they were also affected in specific ways, since the event weakened their social position and made their presence in the American ethnic map subject to question. The traumatic ramifications of this tragedy were echoed by several American writers who tackled the issue from different perspectives. Arab American writers in particular felt the need to voice their community's responses to the amplified sense of discrimination and social exclusion. So, their writings focused mainly on the issues that affected the Arab American community such as the instability of their American identity within the wider multicultural society.

This dissertation mainly analyzes the literary representations of Arab Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 through the study of two novels. The first one is *Terrorist* by John Updike (2006) and the second is *Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby (2007). The choice of the two literary works is dictated by cognitive considerations, since Updike investigates Arab American experiences from the point of view of an outsider, while Halaby's interpretative gaze is that of an insider. On the other hand, the two authors could be seen as being at opposite ends of a generational and popularity spectrum: Updike, the eminent and well loved investigator of the fragilities of the American mainstream writing at the end of a long career, and Halaby, a little known writer, giving her first authorial steps in a skeptical social context, speaking for the Other.

Within this framework, both authors approach the Arab-American identity from different points of view mapping two contrasting portraits. In his book, Updike investigates the motives leading Islamic extremists to violence, diving deeply into their world to understand their rejection of the western "other", reconstructing the path of an Irish-Egyptian teenager who aspires to reconciliation and certainty through destructive choices. Halaby, on the other hand, in her *Once in a Promised Land* looks at both the responses of mainstream American society towards the Arabic community in their midst and the way displacement and social isolation shape the identity of the protagonists

individually. She interpolates the American consciousness about the existence of communities who seek a sense of belonging in the national fabric. In fact, both authors provide a description of characters who suffer from a torn identity, seeking answers to their existential deadlock and undergoing spatial and temporal displacement.

Accordingly, this dissertation will use a comparative approach, constructing a dialogue between the two literary texts. It sheds light on the problematic under study from different perceptions through various cultural perspectives, attempting to draw the borderlines between the rhetoric that perpetuates stereotypical representations of Arab Americans and the one that reflects the intrinsic human values of the depicted characters.

As far as the methodology is concerned, this dissertation is based on both a diachronic and synchronic approach. First, it examines the general framework that defines and monitors the evolution of American literature after the 9/11 tragedy. Then, it moves to a more particular one that examines the two novels by Updike and Halaby in terms of the approach and narrative strategies.

The first chapter is dedicated to the discussion of post 9/11 American literature with the aim of contextualizing the inquiry in its social, cultural and political terms. Moreover, it provides an overview of “literature of trauma” that flourished in the aftermath of 9/11 and considers the debate raised by several critics such as James Wood, Richard Grey, Kristiaan Versluys and Anna Hartnell concerning this type of literary responses to the tragedy. Finally, it contextualizes the Arab American literature before and after 9/11 in relation to the evolution of the diasporic communities from which it emerged.

The second chapter introduces *Terrorist* and presents Updike’s cognitive background and perspectives in order to contextualize his work. This chapter tackles also the dilemma of the religious identity and ethnic categorization in *Terrorist* as well as the narrative strategy adopted by the text providing foundations to his discourse from stylistic point of view.

The third chapter on the other hand, deals with the Halaby’s backgrounds and highlights the process of identity construction in her *Once in a Promised Land*. The last

section of this chapter is similarly reserved for the analysis of the narrative strategy adopted by Halaby.

In this dissertation, a number of concepts introduced within the postcolonial conceptual framework in Homi Bhabha's, Edward Saïd's, Etienne Balibar's writings, are going to be operationalized for a better understanding and to avoid ambiguity. These key concepts are: identity, belonging, culture, hybridity, representation, and orientalism. Many of these concepts are interrelated to be apprehended without much difficulty. Race and ethnic categorizations, for instance, are interlaced, while the borderlines of ethnic identity, cultural identity, religious identity and national identity are in many certain cases porous and interconnected.

The term "identity" has always been at the core of the American national debate reactivated by the problematic of belonging after 9/11. It frequently refers to the belonging to a group with a supposedly common background and unified cultural behavior. For the purpose of this dissertation it will be assumed that culture, in its manifestations, including religion has a major role in the shaping of individual identity. The plethora of discourses talking about belonging to a specific cultural identity converges towards a statement that diasporic displacement leads to potential friction between cultural identities. Etienne Balibar emphasizes in this context that "Identity is never a peaceful acquisition: it is claimed as a guarantee against a threat of annihilation that can be figured by another identity" (Balibar, 1995:186). This evaluation sheds light not only on the increase of Islamophobia in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy but also on the identity fallback. Moreover, identity, according to Balibar, is "a discourse of the tradition" (Balibar, 1995: 187), and frequently also a pan-national discourse. It stems from this assertion that religious identity is a type of identity construct that transcends the notion of nation. So, the meaning of "identity" in specific context is no longer bound to national or ethnic belonging but rather to a religious one.

The previous assertion evokes the conflictual aspect of identity, as Btihaj Ajana mentions when she talks about the problematization of the identity in terms of risk; "the risk of fraud, the risk of crime, the risk of terrorism, the risk of illegal immigration, the risk of illegal working" (Ajana, 2013:79). Such a self-defensive approach to identity construction signals the apparent contradiction between the constructivist discourse that foregrounds the fluidity of identity, and one that views it as steeped in traditional or

national values. In the case of Halaby's and Updike's characters, their quest for inner security and peace, in compliance with their referential values shapes their world views and motivates their responses.

The second concept invoked in this dissertation is orientalism, which is the corollary of the dichotomous perception of human culture constructed in terms of opposition between orient and occident. That is to say, the common prevailing perception of radical difference that the "Orient" has always stimulated in the imagination of the western subject leading to mythologizing acts that identify it, as Todorova explains, as "an exotic and imaginary realm, the abode of legends, fairy tales, and marvels", or as a source of threat (Todorova, 2009:13). In parallel, the "Occident" has also been perceived by non-westerners, as Buruma and Margalit point out, as a source of admiration and as a self-centered power that rules the world (Buruma, 2005). This binary representation of the "Orient" and "Occident", which is based on the dialectic of fascination and reluctance, has been perpetuated through the centuries. Edward Said defines "Orientalism" as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident" (Said, 1978: 25), manifests itself historically in "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1978:3).

Even though the concept of orientalism has come to acquire a cynical connotation for confronting the world by means of a rigid and reductionist binary opposition, several scholars such as Bernard Lewis (Lewis, 1982) developed another point of view about orientalism, attempting to exculpate it from the charge of serving the western imperialist tendencies. They argue that oriental studies are an important initiative to understand oriental cultures, rejecting the idea that the interest in the Islamic world should be exclusive only to those within the culture.

Another important concept to be clarified is stereotype. Drawing upon Foucault's theoretical corpus, Homi Bhabha defines stereotype as "an ambivalent mode of knowledge and power" (Bhabha, 1994:95), which became a feature of colonial discourse to construct "Otherness". The "Other" in this context is just "an object of desire and derision" (Bhabha, 1994:96) and the stereotype related to it, is an outcome of a long standing process of a tense duality of Orient/Occident or the contemporary terms

East/West. In other words; the West is presented as rational while the East is depicted as mythologized, tyrannical and polygamous where women occupy a submissive position.

This assumption triggers two main questions that will be dealt with throughout this dissertation. The first one is: “does the rhetoric expressed in different ways in American literature after 9/11 fall within an orientalist perspective?” The second question is “how does Halaby problematize the troubled domain of hybridity?” The inquiry suggested by the former question, shapes the discussion of Updike’s *Terrorist* where an examination of the survival of this stereotype is engaged accessing the prediction enunciated by Said, who suggest that: “to write about the Arab Oriental world, therefore, is to write with the authority of a nation and not with the affirmation of a strident ideology but with the unquestioning certainty of absolute truth backed by absolute force” (Saïd, 1978:17).

The second question will lead to an examination of the aesthetics of displacement and its impact in a narrative of identity construction shaped by uncertainty and nostalgia in a context of self imposed exile.

## **Chapter I: Writing 9/11**

### **Introduction**

The tragedy of the eleventh of September 2001 drastically shaped the American consciousness and raised new questions that lead many writers to wonder about the capacity of writing to help cope with the initial state of trauma, and to contribute to its transcendence. The shadow of creative paralysis led writers like Jay McInerney to admit, in an article published in *The Guardian* that: «Most novelists I know went through a period of intense self-examination and self-loathing after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center” (McInerney, 2005). Suddenly, he added, «the idea of "invented characters" and alternate realities seemed trivial and frivolous and suddenly, horribly outdated” (Ibid).

Among the new challenges, Don DeLillo stressed out that “the sense of disarticulation we hear in the term "Us and Them" has never been so striking, at either end.” (DeLillo, 2001). This sense of irreparable division was particularly felt by the Arab American Diaspora seen by some as a source of threat, as part of the same « Them » as the attackers. Furthermore, a backlash taking the form of hate crimes, discrimination, and constraining public measures found its way into the creative process. As a result, Arab American writers were receptive to the collective pressures on their community while attempting to deal with issues related to how to construct their identities and to position themselves among other communities.

This chapter discusses both the critical interpretation of the tendencies of post 9-11 American literature, especially the earlier texts related to the physical and psychological trauma and with the effect of the new sense of disarticulation and separation in the literature of the Arab-American Diaspora.

#### **1.1. Trends in 9/11 American literature**

Several American writers have echoed the effect of the psychological trauma caused by the tragedy, responding to the tense and effervescent atmosphere mobilized by the national need, as asserted by Kristiaan Versluys: “If trauma is the collapse of the network of significations, a narrative is needed to restore the broken link.” (Versluys, 2009:4).

Right after 9/11, American writers showed an extremely diverse and contrasting degree of emotions; their first response to the tragedy was “a failure of words” or rather of the futility of writing, as expressed by Toni Morrison in the assertion “I have nothing to say” (Morrison, 2003:1-2). This tragedy forced American writers to confront how to voice the silence and narrate the events as they evolved in a series of images of destruction, dust and the sublime “falling man”, which symbolically expressed the ruin of the imagined “American innocence”. Haunted by those images, these writers sought redemption and relief. In his essay “The ruins of the Future” written few weeks after 9/11 Don DeLillo called for the construction of a collective memory (Ibid).

Commenting on this general psychological state that affected writers as well as citizens, critic Susan Faludi suggests:

“The enemy that hit us on September was real. But our citizenry wasn't just asked to confront a real enemy... We were also enlisted in a symbolic war at home, a war to repair and restore a national myth... It belonged to a long-standing American pattern of response to threat, a response that we've been perfecting since our original wilderness experience”. (Faludi, 2007:13).

Delving deeper into the sources of that state, she adds that “the anxieties it awakened reside deep in our cultural memory. And the myth we deployed to keep those anxieties buried is one we've been constructing for more than three hundred years” (Faludi, 2007: 17).

Another reason behind the trauma among American people and writers is what Philip Rahv clarifies in his “Essays on Literature and Politics, 1932-72”, when he asserts that the self-confidence of USA “would create the illusion that our society is in its very nature immune to tragic social conflicts and collisions” (Rahv, 1979:331). That is to say; the pride of the west or what Don DeLillo labels as the “narcissistic heart of the west” was deeply affected because of a predominant media and political discourse that induced, especially since the end of the Cold War, the American mainstream public into error and created a sense of invincibility and megalomania. Indeed, American policy makers invoke a perpetual ready-made ideological enemy and spread a definition of the American nation in contrast with the “other” within a reductionist perception that

annihilates the cultural diversity. Seeing from this assertion, globalization is nothing but the outcome of this unilateral perception of the world.

This can be glimpsed in the more than thirty novels written after 9/11, focusing either on individual destiny of Americans after this tragedy or in the fictionalization of Muslim Arab characters as terrorists, obsessive, subversive or torn between their spiritual discipline and their instinctive frustrations. This last tendency is illustrated, for example, in Lorraine Adams' *Harbor* (2005)<sup>1</sup>, Pearl Abraham's *American Taliban* (2010)<sup>2</sup>, and Fredrick Forsyth's *The Afghan* (2006)<sup>3</sup>.

However, the prominent novels mentioned below are also targeted by critics like Richard Gray, Kristiaan Versluys, Michael Rothberg and Thomas Bjerre, who states that "it is important that we try to make sense of the way 9/11 has been absorbed into American culture" (Bjerre, 2009:48). In this list, there are canonical writers such as Reynolds Price with *The Good Priest's Son* (2005), Paul Auster with *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), Don DeLillo with *Falling Man* (2007), Jonathan Safran Foer with *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Philip Roth with *Exit Ghost* (2007), and Joseph O'Neill with *Netherland* (2008). Kristiaan Versluys explains how these writers negotiate their responses to the tragedy in the following terms:

"There is the need on the part of the traumatized to relieve anxiety through telling, a feeling on the part of the victims that they have the duty to testify and the desire on the part of the listener to learn more about trauma in order to reintroduce it into a network of signification. The latter need can be exploited: sensationalized, neutralized, abused for political or commercial purposes. It can lead to a better understanding, to compassion, even to agency" (Versluys, 2009:4).

Versluys considers that DeLillo's *Falling Man*, for instance, falls within a trope of melancholia without opening perspectives for the conciliation with self, while

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<sup>1</sup> Lorraine Adams' *Harbor* (2005) is based on Adams' journalistic report on a plot to bomb the Los Angeles International Airport in January 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Pearl Abraham's *American Taliban* (2010) tells the story of an American teenager who becomes a terrorist, attempting, like in Updike's novel, to understand the motivations underlying his choice to fight for Taliban

<sup>3</sup> Fredrick Forsyth's *The Afghan* (2006) is a "post 9/11 apocalyptic western" as was characterized in Kirkus reviews.

Updike's *Terrorist* sanctions the orientalist discourse of Orient/Occident. (Versluys, Ibid: 23).

The same analysis is ratified by Richard Gray who defines post 9/11 American literature as a literature of crisis which combines the domestic and the external, shaded by an atmosphere of grief and melancholia that characterized the American society in the time of crisis and states:

“what was remarkable, and arguably unique about the response of American writers to the crisis of 9/11 was that it reignited their interest in a paradox that lies at the heart of writing at least since the time of Romanticism: the speaking of silence, the search for verbal forms that reach beyond the condition of words, the telling of a tale that cannot yet must be told. “Disorientation is certainly a feature of writing in America after the fall” (Gray, 2011:14).

Gray concludes that several novels such as DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2005), McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) or Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) have failed to fictionalize the conflicts evoked by the tragedy, accusing their writings of identifying with political and media positions.

There is no doubt that 9/11 was not an ordinary event. It has deeply affected a superpower, and consequently, it shook up the world with its dimensions and its political implications. Besides, it set up a form of epistemological break that reshaped the perception of several intellectuals vis-à-vis the world. This led Gray to state that most 9/11 novels which dealt with this tragedy failed to move beyond “the preliminary stages of trauma” (Ibid., 24). In addition, he suggests that writing from the exclusive perspective of trauma failed, in part due to the incapacity to assimilate the various multicultural components into a dynamic American culture.

Moreover, critics like Fritz Breithaupt talk about ideologization and “rituals of trauma” through the creation by the media of totemic images and symbols (Breithaupt, 2003:67-68). The emergence of this kind of literature representations steered Michael Rothberg to attest that “the fiction of 9/11 demonstrates (...) a failure of the imagination” (Rothberg, 2009:153), an assertion that can be taken to refer to the inability to open literary perspectives without reproducing the American exceptionalism, to move beyond the personal crisis and domestic boundaries,

foregrounding the contextual and the historic. On the other hand, Catherine Morley comments in her essay “Plotting against America: 9/11 and the Spectacle of Terror in Contemporary American Fiction” that we face “a new form of narrative realism, a form of realism born of a frustration with the limits of language as an affective and representative tool” (Morley, 2008: 295). She further discusses the inadequacy of language to respond to the event:

“In light of this attack on American soil, the first foreign attack since the World War II, it is unsurprising that American writers became more subjective and less dispassionate in their immediate responses, presenting raw personal grief and their perceived sense of the futility of their literary endeavors. There was a general feeling amongst writers, articulated most succinctly by Oates, that words would inevitably fail in the face of the extremely visual nature of the attacks” (Morley, 2008: 299).

Anna Hartnell discusses the same question saying that:

“[...] realism has been the aesthetic choice for most novelists writing in the shadow of the attacks. But as many critics have noted, these novelists have nonetheless reinforced the tendency of the culture industry to mimic the media in their focus on the category of trauma” (Hartnell, 2011: 483).

Responding to how some novelists negotiate this tragedy, James Wood labelled this fiction as “New York novel” and did not hesitate to consider it as a simple dark work that digs into hyperrealism, populated with noisy, clumsy characters. He writes in an essay published in *The Guardian* under the title “Tell me how does it feel?”:

“Hysterical realism is not exactly magical realism, but magical realism's next stop. It is characterized by a fear of silence. This kind of realism is a perpetual motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity.”(Wood, 2001).

In his criticism of one of Don DeLillo’s assertion that “the world narrative belongs [today] to terrorists” (Ibid), Wood plainly rejects the “foolish notion that the terrorist now does what the novelist used to do” That is; “alter the inner life of the culture” (Ibid). Years later, after analyzing some of the earliest literary articulations

about 9/11, Versluys claims, in his *Out of the Blue*, that many of the novels written after 9/11 are immature and produced for ideological and propaganda purposes (Versluys, 2009: 13). Besides, other critics such as Jenny Edkins find a justification for this creative bias in the difficulty to write about an event that seems “out of the bound of language, outside the worlds we have made for ourselves” (Edkins, 2001).

Among the shortcomings of this early literature, there is the absence or the distortion of Arab characters and the misconceptions of their ethnicity and their religious belonging. In this dissertation, an investigation of misrepresentation of the Arab Muslim communities will be presented and the borderlines between the demonized rhetoric and the human aspects of the protagonists will be drawn through questioning their identities and their existential deadlock after 9/11.

In American popular culture, in the media as well as in some literary writings, Muslims and Arabs are stereotyped in ways that negate the heterogeneity of the Arabic community and the cultural backgrounds of American Muslims, by equating Arabs and Muslims and insisting that all Arabs are necessarily Muslims and all Muslims are Arabs. On the basis of what was said previously, a new racial label seems to be imposed to disconnect members of these communities from their socio-cultural space and to present them as potential terrorists and threats to national security. As a result of the 9/11 tragedy, the criteria of belonging to the homeland must henceforth be defined by a narrow patriotic discourse and that probably the reason why James Wood talks about the “fear of silence” (Ibid). In addition, silence that leads to the accusation of complicity with terrorists is depicted, for instance, in Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land* as will be discussed in the third chapter when the main character is asked to put an American flag in her car as a sign of preserving the national unity and the collective identity which often involves the demonization of the other. In those circumstances, the concept of “Otherness” becomes the new wire fence of national borders in writings, where the multicultural dimension of the United States of America gives way to a unified dimension under the name of consensus. As mentioned by Kristiaan Versluys, who calls for a new perspectives into the emotional and ethical impact of these traumatic tragedy, far beyond from any kind of “patriotic clichés and beyond the pabulum of the talking heads” (Ibid., 13). Outside the domain of literary creation, and mostly ignored by it, the Arab American minorities find themselves confined exclusively in a defensive position, resulting from an intensification of social animosity and division.

Much of the evidence, such as the public harassment and officially sanctioned new regulation testifies the increasing hostility toward Arab American minorities, undermining, ultimately, their dream of a “hybrid identity”. Instead, it creates a state of uncertainty and anxiety about belonging to the collective, and therefore about their assimilation in the American society. Once again, this psychological state is pertinently depicted by Laila Halaby in her *Once in a Promised Land*, where characters seeking a harmonious integration between the Arab and the American culture, find themselves lost, confused and saddened, because of the mainstream “other”.

While many critics point out the incapacity of artistic responses to the event to distance themselves from the official discourse, other voices have refused to join the consensual position and simplistic interpretations of the event spread by official and media spheres. Firstly, they tried to make the American mainstream sensitive to the fact that Arab and Islamic Diaspora in America must be considered as diverse and distinct. Secondly, they called for a moment of reflection and serenity, pushed by a desire to maintain social cohesion, providing an alternative to the political rhetoric of fear and revenge and opening up a space where one can feel safer. Some examples that can be mentioned here are Claire Messud in *The Emperor’s Children* (2006) who succeeded to some extent in depicting the gap between the real and the perceived and Mohsin Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) who focused in a dramatic monologue style on issues of cultural identity, American power and the conditions of transformation of a Pakistani migrant into a fundamentalist, and Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* (2011) which Kamila Shamsie distinguishes by its difference:

“The Submission would have been a remarkable response to last year’s Cordoba House/Park 51 debacle in America, with its Qur’an burnings, its editorials about the difference between what is legal and what is acceptable, its reminder that not all post-9/11 conflicts were taking place outside America. In fact the novel was conceived-and its first draft written- before the explosive arguments around the proposals for a Muslim cultural centre near Ground Zero. Those oft-repeated claims about the novelist’s need to take “the long view” and wait years after an event to write convincingly about it overlook the fact that novels can also anticipate what is yet to come –even if “what is yet to come” overtakes the publication of the novel” (Shamsie, 2011).

In the same vein, Michael Rothberg writes: “What we need from 9/11 novels are cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others”. (Rothberg, 2009:158). In parallel, Wood called for “a space for the aesthetic, for the contemplative, for novels that tell us not "how the world works" but "how somebody felt about something" - indeed, how a lot of different people felt about a lot of different things (Ibid).

Richard Gray claims in this sense that American writers “through their work, by means of a mixture of voices, a free play of different languages and even genres (...) can represent the reality of their culture as multiple, complex and internally antagonistic.” (Gray, 2011:19). He then suggests what he calls the “enactment of the difference” which is “not only the capacity to recognize that some kind of alteration of imaginative structures is required to register the contemporary crisis, ... but also the ability and willingness imaginatively to act on that recognition” (Ibid., 29-30).

Most critics do, nevertheless, identify a new type of fiction published more recently, replacing the early literary mode. This new narrative style, more contemplative, is emerging even though remaining merely focused on the affective and existential issues of 9/11 without being able to overcome the stigma and look beyond the nation’s borders. It inaugurates thereby a shift from what Karen Alkalay-Gut calls the “aesthetics of rawness” to an “aesthetic contemplation” (Alkalay-Gut, 2005: 259) which is “the reconstitution of a stable representational ground from which to regard the events that is, paradoxically, both engaged fully in the raw emotionality of the moment and sufficiently distanced from it to enable aesthetic contemplation” (Lea, 2007: 3) and imposes a departure from a non-fictional and visual image describing the event, to a coherent vision that makes sense of what had really happened.

On the other side of the spectrum, Arab American writers were doubly affected by the event. They reacted to it not only because of its devastating impact but also because they were observing that all they were fighting for; deconstructing the stereotypes and humanizing the Arabic immigration, suddenly collapsed on the aftermath of the 9/11. With a sort of bitterness, they were trying again, as Sisyphus, to restore the image damaged by fanatic acts. In this context, Steven George Salaita points out: they “did not have a mature scholarly apparatus before 9/11. It has proved

challenging to develop one in response to an event that so drastically affected the makeup of the Arab American community” (Salaita, 2005: 148).

Consequently, some of these writers followed the mainstream media, finding it useless to give interpretations and justifications to what happened since they believed that the discrimination against Arabs is deeply rooted in the racialized American system. Moreover, they called for the Arab American Diaspora to distance themselves from Arab world’s political position and to reconsider their adherence to the Arab nationalist rhetoric, as asserted by Salaita: “Arab Americans, and many others, are under the impression that speaking too loudly against the war on terror or American support for Israel is a viable cause for suspicion” (Ibid., 152).

Other Arab American writers deepened instead their attachment to their original identity such as Mohj Kahf especially in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) in which she portrayed Muslim characters struggling to reconcile their faith with values of the host country frequently unreceptive toward the Islamic other, or Diana Abu-Jaber in *Crescent* (2003) dealing with identity hybridity. These writers believe that one can satisfy the curiosity of the other about the Arab culture but also value its ethnic belonging.

These negotiations are not new. The Arab American Diaspora is not the first community to be declared undesirable to join the cultural melting pot and to face integration obstacles. The exceptionality of the migration in America, as a new land of the great immigrant flux since the 18th century is that some of minorities have had better chances of assimilation than others due to the racial system, cultural affinities and especially historical context.

## **1.2. Arab American Diaspora and its literature**

In this section, it would be useful to have a quick glance at the history of the Arabic American literature. This history shows, as asserted by Palestinian-American poet and critic Soheir Liza Majaj in her essay *Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments*, that “it has only recently begun to be recognized as part of the ethnic landscape of literary America” (Majaj, 2008). Andrea Shalal-Esa considered as well in her essay *Clearing a Path for Mainstream Arab-American Literature* that the

community was finally able to generate a “strong, healthy and growing body of Arab-American literature” (Shalal-Esa, 2011).

Indeed, the Arab-American literature was growing substantially in the late 1990s and a steady increase in the number of publication about the Middle East was noticed during the last two decades. As Majaj commented:

“The last two decades have seen a dramatic increase in publication by Arab-American writers. This literary burgeoning reflects in part the shifting historical, social, and political contexts that have pushed Arab-Americans to the foreground, creating both new spaces for their voices and new urgencies of expression, as well as the flourishing creativity of these writers” (Ibid).

Several circumstances helped generate interest in the Arab-American literature over the past decade mainly the Gulf war and the 9/11 tragedy. This resulted in the publication of series of anthologies such as: “Post-Gibran Anthology of New Arab American Writing” (1999) edited by Munir‘Akash and Khaled Mattawa, “Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry” (1988) edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa, “Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists” (1994) edited by Joanna Kadi.

Before reaching this stage, Arab American writers took a long narrowing path of struggle, reflecting a long history of the presence of the Arab immigrants in America which is divided into three phases according to scholars such as Michael Suleiman, Najib E. Saliba, Samir Khalaf and Alixa Naff. To begin with, the first wave of Arab migrants arrived between 1880 and 1924. It was composed of Christians (Greek Orthodox, Maronite, and Melchite Christians) from the great Syria (Lebanon and the modern-day Syria) and Palestinian provinces under the sovereignty of Ottoman Empire and European colonialism. During this period, Arab migrants were in less significant number in comparison with the second and third waves.

As far as their profile is concerned, Alixa Naff pointed out in her essay *Arabs in America: a Historical Overview* that they were mainly unskilled and illiterate. That is to say; they were mostly young farmers who intended to stay in America for some time so as to save money and return back home. So, they worked as itinerant peddlers and later on as shop retailers (Naff, 1983: 15-17). Accordingly, the early Arab immigrants generally were easily assimilated by the American society despite some regulations of

the time such as the Naturalization Act of 1790<sup>4</sup> that restricted American citizenship to Europeans only<sup>5</sup> and the financial stability of Arab immigrants that generated an ethnic group formed on the basis of the rejection of traditional values. However, the establishment of another regulatory mechanism restricting immigration quotas in the 1920 sharpened their sense of identity and community belonging and increased their involvement in the American political process.

As for the reasons that underlie the immigration of the Arabs to the United States of America, Najib E. Saliba cited the aspiration of Arabs to explore a new economic perspective that might improve their conditions of living, especially after the success of the Syrians who exhibited Arab goods at the 1876 Philadelphia exposition. However, political motives also contributed to accentuate this immigration since this region was subject to sectarian conflicts and repressive policies adopted by the Ottoman authorities. Moreover, some scholars such as Alixa Naff indicated that Arab Christians were more keen on immigrating to America because of the similarity of their faith with the religion of the host country while Muslims were often reluctant to migrate to non-Muslim countries due to their fear of any religious and cultural persecutions. This explains why Muslim Arabs immigration to America was less important than the Christian one. The few ones who migrated shaded off their religious affiliation just like Amir Kapoor, the Pakistani corporate lawyer in Ayad Akhtar *Disgraced* (2012) who hid his Muslim background for the sake of his job with overwhelming consequences. Furthermore, Naff summed up in the following excerpt the conditions that rule the integration of Arab Diaspora in the American society:

“Immigrant assimilation into the mainstream of American society has been for all immigrants a continuing, many-faceted process, moving unevenly and unpredictably through their lives in America’s pluralistic society. Its complexities were governed by a number of variables inherent in the migration of any given people: the period of migration; the social, political, economic conditions in the host country; the size of the group; its cultural values and

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<sup>4</sup> The Naturalization Act of 1790 limited naturalization to immigrants who were “free white persons”. This Act was repealed by the Naturalization Law of 1890, allowing African descent to become citizens.

<sup>5</sup> To testify to this fact, Tanyss Ludescher tells in his essay *From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature*, the story of the Lebanese immigrant George Dow who, in 1914, was denied American citizenship on the basis that he was Asian and did not belong to the white race.

customs; the group's motivation for migrating; its expectations; and the degree of nationalistic sentiments held by it. These variables hold special relevance to any understanding of the assimilation of Syrians in America" (Naff, 1985: 8-9)

The economic dynamics and the state of stability in which immigrants lived in America created a cultural dynamics reflected by the number of periodicals and magazines published during this period. Indeed, Arab migrants established many Arabic and English newspapers and periodicals that expressed their identity, promoted their culture, and built up ties with the mother land. The first Arabic newspaper in New York appeared with the name *Kawkab Amerika* (Star of America) (1892), followed by *Al-Ayyam* (Days) (1897), *Al-Huda* (Guidance) (1898), *Mir'at al Gharb* (Mirror of the West) (1899), *Al-Bayan* (Declaration) (1910), *Al-Sayeh* (Traveler) (1910), *Al-Mouhajjer* (Immigrant), (Naff, 1993: 319, 324).

Known under the designation "Mahjer Writers" (Immigrant writers) Gibran Khalil Gibran, Michael Naimy, Ameen Rihani, Ilya Abou Madi, who are eminent writers of the Arab Diaspora, met in 1920 in the literary organization called "Al-Rabita Al-Qalamaiyya" (The Pen League). In fact, they had a significant impact on the literary life in the Diaspora and the Arab world. So as to prove themselves worthy in the U.S. and to gain acceptance by white Americans, as attested by Majaj, these writers produced nostalgic writings about their homeland and were more preoccupied by spiritual and cultural topics such as sectarian religious conflict and reforms in the Arabic world rather than with tackling directly the thematic of identity formation and the American racial system. In addition, Majaj emphasized that in dealing with these topics, "Arab-American writers wrote about their Arab background with hesitation and through self-distancing narrative strategies" (Majaj, 2008), indicating that they were cautious that their writings would become an obstacle to their assimilation into the American society. Majaj pointed out that the early Arab writers "stressed their Christian identity [and] their geographical origin in the 'Holy Land' " (Ibid) as a tactic to avoid any misconception of their culture. The autobiographer Abraham Rihbany, for instance, used a biblical discourse in *A Far Journey* (1914) and *The Syrian Christ* (1916) in order to reveal his religious filiations to the Christian identity as attested by Majaj who stated that Christian identity in this case is related to "whiteness". Ameen Rihani as the pioneer of Arab American literature who paved the way for the first Arab-American writers avoided dealing in his writing with any controversial topic within the American

society. Rihani's works included a series of philosophical, literary, social, political essays and letters such as: *The Lily of Al-Ghor* (1917) in which he described the oppression against women during the Ottoman Empire, *The Book of Khalid* (1911) in which he dealt with the immigration issues in an attempt to express the dualism with the Orient and the Occident without any value judgment. Another eminent Arab American writer who gained certain renown among American writers is Gibran Khalil Gibran. His work *The Prophet* (1923) was translated into more than 40 languages and expressed the human condition in lyric style within a mystical framework and with a compromising thought between orient and occident.

The second wave of Arab migration began after the beginning of the Second World War and is much more significant in numbers. Beside this, the establishment of Israel in 1948 accentuated the displacement of the Palestinian refugees towards America. Unlike the first wave which was predominantly Christian, the hallmark of this wave was the increasing number of Muslims. It was composed by educated, skilled and politically involved people, engaged with the nationalist issues of the Arab world as asserted by Naff. But, the beginning of the World War II fostered the community's sense of patriotism and made them feel a part of the American community. According to Evelyn Shakir, an Arab American critic, Arab-American literature was modest in terms of publications during 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Vance Bourjaily, William Peter Blatty, Eugene Paul Nassar and Salom Rizk with his *Syrian Yankee* (1943) were the most important Arab American writers of this period even though they dealt modestly with the issue of their ethnic identity. In "Arab-American Literature," Shakir discussed the different strategies adopted by these authors to deal with the issue of Arab American identity. Vance Bourjaily, for instance, did not make any allusion to ethnicity in his two novels *The End of My Life* (1947) and *Confessions of a Spent Youth* (1960). In the first one, he briefly explored the issue of ethnic identity when he returned to his ancestral village in Lebanon, while in the second one he portrayed the features of American life with a nostalgic tone. However, no matter how hard he tried to hide his identity the American racial system was quiet implacable vis-à-vis the ethnic community. If Vance Bourjaily was largely indifferent to his Arab American background, William Peter Blatty was according to Shakir haunted by his ethnic identity and tried hard to escape it. In his autobiography *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* (1960), he described his feeling

towards his ethnicity in humoristic way to hide his anxiety of being different and foreign.

The third major wave of immigration, which began in 1967, accelerated the expansion of Arab community in USA. The abolition of the quota system in 1965, the Arab-Israeli war in 1967 as well as the Lebanese Civil War in the 1970s and 1980s formed the conditions for a major immigration to America. Due to these events, anti-colonial feeling and Arab nationalist acts erupted and the first Arab American organizations were formed to defend the Arab political positions. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Gulf War, and the 1987 Palestinian uprising against Israel further politicized the Arab American Diaspora. In contrast with the pioneers, the early 21st century marked the emergence of a new generation of Arab American writers who confront different cultural, political, and social issues within a context characterized by social tension. In addition, new important works which dealt with fiction, poetry, autobiographies, anthologies and literary criticism rose to the surface but remained far from being integrated into American consciousness due to stereotypes and the increasing of the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism. To transcend these obstacles, Arab American writers created their own platforms to present their works, such as *Dar Rawi*, an organization that gathered over 100 Arab-American writers, the journal *Mizna*, founded in 1999 and finally the journal *Al Jadid* founded by Elie Chalala 14 years ago.

The later generation of writers who evolved in a Civil Rights context thought about identity issues. However, Majaj stressed that the new context “made it difficult for Arab-American writers to engage with their identity with comfort and directness”. Joseph Geha, for instance, provided in his 1990 short story collection *Through and Through: Toledo Stories*, a portray of immigrants struggling with adaptation and negotiation of their identities. In other words; Geha’s characters suffered to preserve their Arab roots while attempting to adapt their culture to conditions of the new host land. This condition is described by the critic Layla Al Maleh in this excerpt:

“Born away from the homeland, Anglo-Arab literature is haunted by the same “hybrid”, “exilic”, and “diasporic” questions that have dogged fellow post-colonialists. The tension between the centre and the periphery, the “homeland” and the “host land” raises, time and again, familiar issues of belonging, allegiance, and affinity. Concerns pertinent to cultural and relational

identification lie at the heart of these works, and the tension between assimilation and preservation is equally persistent” (Al Maleh, 2009: x).

The last two decades also saw the flourishing of new novels written by Arab American women in a move into gender issues. These writers stood out from the pioneers in terms of their style, and thematic approach. Their concerns were how to break down stereotypes about Arab women, to reflect women’s pain in patriarchal Arabic society and to investigate the misunderstanding between *Orient* and *Occident* especially after 9/11. Among the list of such novels one can mention Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz* (1993) which is considered as the first mainstream Arab-American novel that dealt with the stereotypes and criticized American cultural attitudes through a mitigated feminist vision. Second, Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) that portrayed the religious and social background of Muslims in America. Third, Naomi Shihab Nye in her book *Habibi* (1997) told the story of a teenager and her family who moved from their home in St. Louis to their homeland Palestine and the impact of their displacement. Fourth, Randa Jarrar with *Map of Home* (2008) that questioned the multiple identities, using all the techniques of humor to attract American readers. Fifth, Laila Alami with her novel *Secret Son* (2009) tried to transpose a cultural part of Morocco to the American audience through an insider’s view. The author was perplexed with the lack of hope that overtakes Moroccan citizens involved in the identity formation within a multifaceted society. Mona Simpson is another Arab-American writer who published several novels but she did not strongly identify as Arab American and the subject was not central to her work. Others instead such as Lebanese American Lawrence Joseph destabilized all racial and ethnic categories and invoked cultural specificities of the identity (foods, places, familial traditions) in what Majaj considered as “a familiar gesture of ethnic reclamation” (Majaj, 2008).

To conclude, the 9/11 tragedy was a turning point in the life of Arab American intelligentsia. It did not only show the vulnerability of the national borders but shaped the American culture and raised feelings of belonging and identity as well. Therefore, Arab American writers made use of diverse creative modes of expression to respond to the anti-Arab campaign, whether in prose, poetry or paintings, seeking to stimulate the American imaginary about silenced persecution of Arabs and Muslims. In this context, Arab American writers were called upon to deal with issues of identity construction among other American communities with more audacity. They were involved in this

process while remaining faithful to their national cultural affiliation. Regarding the way they wrote, the lyric mode preferred by older writers remained omnipresent in their works but they created new expressions of Arab-American realities. Although they swung back and forth between their cultural heritage and the American culture while they undertook identity issues, these writers played and still play a key role in bridging two worlds and two cultures.

## Chapter II: “*Terrorist*” by John Updike

### Introduction

The novel to be examined in this chapter is *Terrorist* by the American author John Updike. The choice of this novel is based on two main reasons. The first one is to identify the nature of the discourse held by an American writer as an outsider in relation to the phenomena he addresses and then, to discuss his perception of Arabic Diaspora culture.

Updike is an eminent writer honored with the most prestigious awards for fiction including the “Pulitzer Prize for Fiction” in 1982 and 1991.<sup>6</sup> He is considered one of the greatest American novelists of his time. He wrote twenty six novels, several short stories, poems, art, literary criticism, and children’s books. As far as Updike’s background is concerned, it is concerned with religious morality and philosophical interest; He writes in a detailed way describing the ordinary in American people’s lives. As he attested in an interview with the BBC Radio: “The writer must face the fact that ordinary lives are what most people live most of the time, and that the novel as a narration of the fantastic and the adventurous is really an escapist plot; that aesthetically, the ordinary, the banal, is what you must deal with. So I tried to make interesting narratives out of ordinary life by obscure and average Americans” (BBC Radio 4’s Front Row programme, 2008).

This chapter presents Updike’s cognitive background and perspectives in order to contextualize the selected work and discusses the issue related to the religious identity and the ethnic categorization. It tries to comprehend the nature of the narrative strategy implemented by the author to approach this problematic.

### 2.1. John Updike’s cultural and cognitive perspectives

Updike has embraced new experiences of writing styles by focusing on the existence of being and the existential preoccupations in the style of Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. According to Anna Hartnell, Updike endured “an existential crisis” in

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<sup>6</sup> Among many other literary awards, Updike won American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Fiction in 2007, Rea Award for the Short Story in 2006, PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 2004, New York Times 10 Best Books of the Year in 2000 and 1997, Common Wealth Award of Distinguished Service in 1993, PEN/Malamud Award in 1988, etc.

1958 that had to do with fear of death (Hartnell, 2012:138), but devoting himself to reading Kierkegaard and Barth especially Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843), he managed to recover from his existential crisis. The point is that religious topics are not alien to Updike's preoccupation generated in the form of moral debate. These kinds of religious and moral concerns shape Updike's fictional worlds as he states in an interview that "religion enables us to ignore the nothingness and get on with the jobs of life" (Updike, 1989).

Having witnessed the 9/11 attacks, Updike writes *Terrorist* in 2006 marking a significant deviation from his previous novels in terms of the theme he tackles and the way he approaches the subject of religion. In this novel Updike depicts an Arab-American teenager Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy whose religious motivations would have turned him into a criminal by blowing up the Lincoln Tunnel, if Jack Levy, the Jewish father figure of the novel, had not changed his mind. Updike dramatizes Ahmad's own dilemmas of religious interpretations in which his faith will be proved by sacrificing innocent American citizens in a sort of simulation of the old Abrahamic ritual of the sacrifice when the prophet Abraham was ordered by God to sacrifice his own son. At the end of this novel, the writer allows Ahmed to give the right to human norms at the expense of the religious faith.

In this work, John Updike distinguishes himself from other writers dealing with 9/11 by investigating the motives rather than considering the effects. He also dives deeply into the perpetrators' world to understand their rejection of the western "other". In his attempt to give a voice to the perpetrator and to find out the link between him and his intended project, Updike ventures to dissect the religious discourse that eventually underlies the spreading violence. Finally, he transcends the superficial profile of the Eastern characters to render a portrait of a Jihadist depicted as socially and psychologically fragile. Given his profile as a journalist and critic, Updike uses the real life events, his experience as well as the mainstream reaction to reimaging a fictional event which seems likely to happen, after 9/11.

In *Terrorist*, the writer illustrates also the clash between the strict Islamic traditions and the hedonistic culture of America experienced by a young committed Muslim. For Updike, the hedonism as rejected by Ahmed and commented by Jack Levy is the antipode of the boy's religion or even any other religion. It is "the way of

infidels” and the deviation from the “right path” (216) according to Ahmed and his mentor Sheik Rashid. Jack Levy, his high school guidance counselor and the second main character of the novel is equally concerned, and considers the passions of the young American people as a negative impulse that destroy the national values.

Updike investigates the inclinations that led to the tragedy by digging in two fields: a psychological and a religious one, turning his attention to the psyche of Ahmed the imagined terrorist which is created as a complex and even endearing character. He proposes that the main reasons behind the latter’s misguided destructive fervour are found in the environment in which grew that created an emotional gap that his behaviour attempts to resolve. The psychological treatment of the protagonist does not go over some of the Freudian expressions of impulsive instincts that lead to the death wish or “thanatos”. For Updike, affective frustration is the main reason behind the weakness of the extremist personality, psychological predispositions and thus, his inclination towards violence.

Updike portrays the main character Ahmed, the child of an Irish mother and an absent Egyptian father as a person haunted by the shadow of the missing father. He feels that he is an illegitimate child. For this reason, he does not get a single close friend. In addition, only the Islamic rhetoric provides protection against the shame, dishonor and humiliation the protagonist feels. Hence, he is a fertile soil for an indoctrination process at the hands of a Yemeni cleric at the Islamic cultural center where demonization of the modernity and secularism is the slogan as, Updike tells the reader, “he thought he might find in this religion a trace of the handsome father who had receded at the moment his memories were beginning” (99). Besides, this need for the father is voiced by Ahmed:

“I have only one or two photographs. My mother may have some she has hidden from me. When I was small and innocent, she refused to answer my many questions about my father. I think his desertion left her very angry. I would like, someday, to find him. Not to press any claim, or to impose any guilt, but simply to talk with him, as two Muslim men would talk.”(36)

This imperative call for the father is also voiced by his mother Terry in conversation with Jack Levy: “I resented that Ahmad cared so much about a father who

didn't squat for him... But I guess a boy needs a father, and if he doesn't have one he will invent one" (171). As a matter of fact, the presence of the cleric in the teenager's life is due to the absence of parental affection as well as a mother's lack of focus, discipline and ultimate commitment to her own life as the boy comments:

"I think recently my mother has suffered one of her romantic sorrows, for the other night she produced a flurry of interest in me, as if remembering that I was still there. But this mood of hers will pass. We have never communicated much. My father's absence stood between us, and then my faith, which I adopted before entering my teen years. She is a warm-natured woman, and were I a hospital patient I would gladly entrust myself to her care, but I think she has as little talent for motherhood as a cat. Cats let the kittens suckle for a time and then treat them as enemies. I am not yet quite grown enough to be my mother's enemy, but I am mature enough to be an object of indifference" (212).

In addition, Updike portrays Ahmed as a teenager who tries to suppress his libidinal drive because of his religious belief. His attraction to his African American schoolmate Jorilyeen Grant reflects his conflicted feelings. In order to compensate this deprivation, his erotic desire takes a fantasmatic form as he imagines the Horis in paradise. "The seventy two virgins (...) will minister him on the other side" (305). As far as his predisposition for violence and inclination for death are concerned, Ahmed clearly expresses that in the novel to the Imam who tries maliciously to draw a sad picture of life in these terms: "the world, in its American portion, emits a stench of waste and greed, of sensuality and futility, of the despair and lassitude." (233). This indoctrination highlights how Ahmed forges a dark perception of American society depicting it as "a nation of nearly three hundred million-anarchic souls, their millions of daily irrational impulses and self-indulgent actions flitting out of just around the edge of feasible surveillability" (44). This clarifies that Updike constructs his novel on a dialectic tension between desire and death or Eros and Thanos.

The second theme the author explores in order to attempt to understand the so called terrorist, to reveal the motives of terrorist acts and to forge the right perception of the Islamic fundamentalism is the religious one. For this purpose, all the plot is based on dislocating the religious discourse by quoting verses of the Koran substantially and digging into its teachings but also through observing the allegoric interpretation of the

Prophet Mohammed's Hadiths developed by Ahmed's monitor, sheik Rashid who teaches Ahmad that secularism is a sin; that non-Muslims are kafir (infidels) who must be punished in the afterlife and that Muslims must follow the right path through rejecting western values.

Updike starts his novel with a depiction of the American way of life as Ahmad witnesses it from his religious worldview, describing its American way of life as lacking in substance and as threatened by moral decadence because it is based on consumerism, sexual immodesty, idolatry and extravagance as Ahmed describes:

“All day long, at Central High School, girls sway and sneer and expose their soft bodies and alluring hair. Their bare bellies, adorned with shining navel studs and low-down purple tattoos...Boys strut and saunter along and look dead-eyed, indicating with their killer gestures and careless scornful laughs that this world is all there is- a noisy varnished hall lined with metal lockers and having at its end a blank wall desecrated by graffiti and roller-painted over so often it feels to be coming closer by millimeters” (3).

Updike, through his choice of a teenager as the central character to represent and schematize crudely the complex feelings of a young person who grows up in a different cultural space and is depicted as a terrorist suggests, even though he does not declare it, that the roots of the problem lie between the lines of the intolerant religious text as when the imam and his disciples engage in the discussion of the following verse from the third sura:

*Let not the infidels deem that the length of days we give them is good for them!  
We only give them length of days that they may increase their sins! And a  
shameful chastisement shall be their lot (76),*

or when Ahmed response to Jack Levy comments “I can't believe you're seriously intending to kill hundreds of innocent people” (294) by extrapolating from the following coranic verse: *Be ruthless to unbelievers* (294).

The novel emerges definitely as an audacious attempt to shed light on the relationship between religion and violence but Updike misses the argument by citing the verses without situating them in their historical context characterized by the conflict

between the new emerging political force led by Mohammed Ben Abdullah, as a prophet and a statesman, who changed the history of the Arabian Peninsula and of much of the world, and the other Arabian tribes which defended their power and interest around the pagan shrine of “Kaaba” under the protection of the “Quraysh” tribe. The new religion evolved from a local one providing spiritual answers to a political framework for all Arab tribes and nomads under a unique state flag. The verses cited by the author reflect this state of war and it is possible to argue that when transposing them to another socio-cultural context within a literary work may show a simplistic understanding of process of interpretation of the text whether by the main protagonist or its author. Moreover, Updike’s moral debate; the motive of the perpetrator, seems to be a purely religious matter. Through this consideration, Updike creates a fictional narrative based on a moral rhetoric and dissociates the political aspects of the novel. Nevertheless, he falls within a political misinterpretation in his attempt to understand the religious discourse.

Anna Hartnell makes this very point when she suggests that:

“Updike's novel fails to conceive of a meaningful relationship between faith and politics, and thus Ahmad's Islam is ultimately repudiated as a religious position irremediably contaminated by politics. In this sense Islam is measured against an implicitly Christian model of religion and is found wanting” (Hartnell, 2011:495).

In addition, Updike presents what H. Pirnajmuddin and M. Salehnia describe in *Islam and Modernity* as “the representation of Islam as a one-dimensional, backward, despotic religion (that) leaves no possibility for Ahmad to be an ‘American Muslim’” (Pirnajmuddin & Salehnia, 2012:183) This perception is not shared by other authors like Theodore Dalrymple who considers in an article that:

“Updike has produced a more convincing and subtle, and ... accurate portrait of a young Islamist terrorist than he has generally received credit for—even for all his book’s literary faults. He rightly sees Islamism in the West as culturally hybrid, rather than as a pure product of Islam: a reaction, albeit one consonant with certain Islamic traditions, to a very severe and, indeed, overwhelming cultural challenge from without rather than as something arising purely or spontaneously from within Islam itself. He understands the

deeply human, but also deeply destructive, desire for a simple solution to all existential and practical problems at once” (Dalrymple, 2006).

Based on what was said earlier, a number of interrogations become inevitable- Does Updike’s *Terrorist* give us the opportunity to understand the relationship between religion and violence or is it a simple apology as many other expressions to sanction the stereotypes through a sort of orientalist perception of the Islamic world? Can we assert that his attempt to position himself within the perspective of the "other" is sincere? Can we say that his endeavor to distance himself from western victimization position is successful?

The Egyptian scholar Ahmed Gamal best sums up the general attitude among American writers after the terrorist attacks in his essay *Encounters with Strangeness in the Post-9/11 Novel*:

“These narrative works are thus an expression of the cultural ambivalence toward the other, a step toward beginning a new kind of writing that does not easily conform to orientalist conventions and simply perpetuate existing traditions. It is a writing that challenges these conventions and traditions that are informed by the familiar oppositions between “them” and “us,” East and West, and the pre-modern and modern” (Gamal, 2011:51).

The same opinion is shared by Hartnell who considers that “Updike approaches this reactive crusade on the part of western countries by sympathetically positioning his own narrative voice vis-à-vis an Arab American Muslim convert”(Ibid., 479). Indeed, Updike sheds light on a part of Arab American religious culture that may lead to an erroneous scriptural reading.

No one can deny the fact that understanding a religious text is not an easy task because of its subtle language which is not a simple medium but a linguistic structure loaded with symbolic connotation defies the simplistic interpretations. Even Updike recognizes it in an interview in the New York Times when he explains that:

“A lot of the Koran does not speak very eloquently to a Westerner. Much of it is either legalistic or opaquely poetic. There’s a lot of hellfire inscriptions of making unbelievers drink molten metal occur more than once. It’s not a fuzzy,

lovable book, although in the very next verse there can be something quite generous...” (Updike, 2006).

As George Schöpflin asserts, language is a “fertile area for misunderstandings, because language exists at three levels - the philological, the sociological-cultural and the political - and it is fatally easy to make assumptions from one level and transfer them to another” (Schöpflin, 2010:70).

If that is the case, the religious text is the outcome of a historical context. Consequently, transposing it to another context may not be adequate. Yet, it is apparent that Updike is trying to discover the justification of violence in the religious text and in order “to understand the animosity and hatred which an Islamic believer would have for [the western] system” (Updike, 2006), although he claimed “I’ve never ventured too far from what I could verify with my own eyes” (Ibid). However, it is believed that his audacious cultural trip to creep into a hermetic realm in order to translate what scholars have been debating for centuries so as to understand the intrinsic meaning of the text may be unfortunate. Additionally, one has to admit that it is difficult even for Arab native speakers to understand terminologies of the ancient Arabic language whether they are in forms of ancient poetry or religious texts. Hence, an independent linguistic discipline has been developed and linguistic debates were initiated among Islamic scholars. Moreover, Updike recognizes it in the previous quoted interview when he said: “My conscience was pricked by the notion that I was putting into the book something that I can't pronounce (...) Arabic is very twisting, very beautiful. The call to prayer is quite haunting; it almost makes you a believer on the spot. My feeling was, ‘This is God’s language, and the fact that you don’t understand it means you don’t know enough about God’” (Ibid). In fact, the actual conflict within the Islamic sects (Suni, Shii, Salafist, Sufi, Malikit, Hanbalist, Ibadi, Mahdawi, Ahmadi, etc...) is mainly due to the contrasting interpretations (Al Ijtihad) elaborated since the “Rashidun Caliphate” era between scholars who remain related to the strict literal orthodox reading of the precepts and the others who tend towards a symbolic and metaphoric reading. Indeed, both readings remain driven by pure politico-ideological motives related to what the eminent historiographer and sociologist Ibn Khaldûn calls “growth and decline” of successive Arab-Islamic dynasties. In a nut shell, Updike hermeneutical personified outlook fails to some extent to read the text within its historical context and fails to nuance between different levels of connotations.

## **2.2. The dilemma of religious identity and ethnic categorization in Updike's *Terrorist*.**

Issues of ethnic identity and belonging that are still at the core of a national debate turn out to be particularly problematic within the American racialized system which makes Arab-Americans more vulnerable and their assimilation more random. Within this framework, Updike deals with this matter through the Huntingtonian paradigm: first, by portraying the western way of living as if assaulted by the Islamic religious obscurantism and second by building the identity on the basis of the moral dichotomy between the good and the evil. As George Schöpflin attests in this matter: "Victimhood is a highly effective form of identity construction, in as much as it satisfies the need for a sense of moral worth and does so relatively easily" (Schöpflin, 2010:56).

Before proceeding with the analysis of the treatment of this problematic of the religious identity, it would be helpful to evoke the point of view of Etienne Balibar who states that: "Identity is never a peaceful acquisition: it is claimed as a guarantee against a threat of annihilation that can be figured by another identity" (Balibar, 1995:186). Thus, the identity according to the author is more "a discourse of the tradition" than a national discourse. He also declares:

"In reality there are no identities, only identifications: either with institution itself, or with other subjects by the intermediary of the institution. Or, if one prefers, identities are only the ideal goal of processes of identification, their point of honor, of certainty or uncertainty of their consciousness, thus their imaginary referent" (Ibid., 187).

This view leads to note that the grounds for the shifting to traditional or national identity discourse in the case of the protagonists in Halaby and Updike novels is the quest for inner security and peace in compliance with their cultural values.

Cornel West also states that "Identity is fundamentally about desire and death. How you construct your identity is predicated on how you construct desire, and how you conceive of death, desire for recognition, quest for visibility, the sense of being acknowledged; a deep desire for association...Persons who construct their identities and desires often do it in such a way that they are willing to die for it" (West, 1992:20-23). The definition of Cornel about identity is fitting in some way the main character's

profile in Updike's *Terrorist* regarding the way he conceives his belonging as well as how he constructs his identity and defends it. Moreover, Updike's *Terrorist* is not only a novel about an American Muslim teenager who faces challenges in his life caused by his rejection of the American way of life but it is also about a human being seeking an identity in a multi-ethnic society. Even though Updike's intention is not necessarily to debate a Gnostic text while looking for the correlation between religion and violence, he states that the protagonist takes refuge in religion in order to overcome a crisis of the self and to construct an identity as a reaction to values that prevail in the American society. In fact, the author concludes that Ahmed's sense of selfhood is built on the basis of religious indoctrination aggravated by a feeling of exclusion which is the effect of an American system of ethnic and cultural segregation. In other words; after September the 11<sup>th</sup>, the Arab Muslim world witnessed a kind of shaping and strengthening of religious identity as a reaction to an unsympathetic categorization system that shaped the views of the American mainstream. Indeed, the teenager is neither a pure white American nor a pure Arab. With his Irish-American mother and unknown Egyptian father, he is lodged in an in-between position which places him in the wrong racial category to deserve the social American recognition. This uncomfortable position is depicted in his reactions to situations he faces. Perplexed and intolerant, the protagonist usually has the sense of rejected by both his mother's white world and by the Arab community he sees as equally polluted. In this in-betweenness, Ahmad opts for his religious identity in order to establish a stable self and come to terms with his existential anguish. To sum up, by choosing this type of identity, the main character seeks salvation and release.

The issue of racial hybridity in *Terrorist* is discussed by Geoffrey Nash, in *Writing Muslim Identity* who, analyzing Ahmed, concludes that:

“Racially hybrid though he is, he can hardly be considered so in cultural terms. The forgetting in his case is a function of Updike's decision to effectively erase Ahmed's American childhood. The author seems intent on imposing an exclusively religious identity on the tabula rasa mid of his young proto-terrorist, a convert to Islam from the age of eleven. Apart from a subtle physical feature or an unconsciously displayed mannerism linking him with his American mother, Ahmed is born again to Muslim faith in a more radical manner than any

American Christian, excising in the process all sense of connection with his motherland (Nash, 2012:105).

The history of minorities in the United States is littered with pain, bitterness and fear. Some events are tragic while the others are subject to collective indignations. From the racial segregation, the “Jim Crow” system, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Japanese internment program to the “US patriot act” and “National Security Entry-Exit Registration System”<sup>7</sup>, issues of belonging and identity are still a major concern for ethnic minorities who now question the American collective consciousness and calling for social redemption through an approach that respects their cultural specificities and their dignity.

The Arab community in America feels very vulnerable due to its size, cultural and religious diversity. The degree of its participation in the political and economic sphere is modest and random. Therefore, this precarious position makes its integration into heterogeneous society a difficult task. As a result, in some writings Arab Americans are seen as invisible while in others they are described in Nadine Naber’s words, as “ambiguous insiders”. (Naber, 2010:37-61) In opposition to this vulnerability, Updike uses Levy’s Jewishness as a reference to successful American ethnic assimilation which goes back to the 1920s and 30s. Moustafa Bayoumi states in his article “Muslims and Arabs in the American Imagination”: “If Arab-Americans are now frequently coded with a kind of blackness, then being Jewish today is to have earned the status of whiteness, demonstrated by Levy’s ascribed loyalty to wife, city and country” (Bayoumi, 2010). Moreover, the assertion of being invisible seems incongruous taking into consideration the fact that Arab Americans are officially categorized by the US Census Bureau as Caucasoid-whites while they are treated as non-whites. According to some scholars, such categorization is meant to disempower Arabs and make them more invisible. Furthermore, as discussed earlier Arab immigrants have been coming to America on a small scale since the beginning of the twentieth century. Later on, immigration steadily increased due to political, cultural and religious factors such as escaping persecution and the consequences of civil war, getting rid of the traditions and

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<sup>7</sup> The National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) is initiated in September 2002 as part of the War on Terrorism. This system has a controversial domestic component that enforces immigrants to update information about their plans. NSEERS is criticized for profiling immigrants on the basis of their ethnicity and their religion.

finally, avoiding religious conservatism. To clarify this position, Steven George Salaita writes:

“Arab Americans exist as a composite of postmodern Americana and American subculture in this complex of issues. To various degrees, their positioning in the United States has been highly complex for some time, but 9/11 exacerbated the complexities by simultaneously endowing the community with sympathetic gestures and amplifying xenophobic outpourings of imperative patriotism, a mindset that is by its very nature antithetical to the Arab American experience” (Salaita, 2006:85).

However, stereotypes about Arabs due to their long history of conflicts with the American foreign military policy (1967 war, 1973 oil embargo, the first Gulf war) set up an ambiguous relationship between Arab Americans and their new homeland which is marked by suspicion regarding their loyalty.

As it was mentioned previously, sentiments after the tragedy led to a rising racial discrimination against Arab Americans pushing them in a position of self-defense making them vulnerable in the context of the war on terrorism. Another main factor of this vulnerability is the Arab American identity which is shaped as a monolithic category while they are diverse in terms of race, religion and language as what earlier discussed. For instance, the majority of the first generation of migrants was Christian while the following generations were a myriad of ethnic groups coming from different backgrounds (Arab, Tamazight, Kurds, Jews, Muslim Sunnite, Muslim Shiite, Druze, and Baha’i) as Moustafa Bayoumi acknowledges in the same article:

“Arabs and Muslims (who, in the real world, are two overlapping categories, but in the world of American perceptions essentially the same thing) have entered the American imagination with full force, but their entry has been racialized. What this means in the specific inflections of the American vernacular is an association with blackness, for Arabs and Muslims in America are not a part of the immigrant fabric of the nation but a social problem to be dealt with. While Jews and Hindus are today handed ethnicity, Arabs and Muslims are saddled with race. They have become an American dilemma” (Ibid).

In *Terrorist* the narrator does not distance himself sufficiently from the prevailing social perception of Arabs and does not dedicate a significant awareness in time analyzing their history in America as he considers them as idle and portrays their condition as “an underclass, alien in a nation that persists in thinking of itself as light skinned, English-speaking, and Christian” (244), while the central character is considered “as outsider among outsiders” (Ibid., 244). The novel also reflects the stereotypical images that question the community presence in America as Christian; this is particularly obvious through the voice of the Secretary of Homeland Security who speaks in these terms:

“What do these people [Muslims] have to offer instead? More Taliban - more oppression of women, more blowing up statues of Buddha. The mullahs in northern Nigeria are telling people not to let their children be given polio vaccine, and then their kids are brought in paralyzed to the health-aid clinic!” (258).

I deem that the narrator, while proceeding so by describing ethnic minorities in this way or by creating, for instance, characters like the homeland security official who stepped in blatant anti Arab discourses, attempts literarily to question the racialized American system.

Similarly, other races namely Africans and Latinos endure the same narrative treatment for example Ahmed describes the street of this city in this terms to reveal how the extremism is the logic outcome of the social exclusion:

“the downtown of an afternoon gives a festive, busy impression: east main street in the blocks around Tilden is a carnival of idleness, thronged by an on rolling mass of dark citizens in flashy clothes, a Mardi Gras parade of costumes, lovingly assembled by those whose lawful domain extends scarcely an inch beyond their sins, and whose paltry assets are all on view” (13).

Throughout the narrative, Updike portrays Africans as well in a disdainful manner as asserted by Delbanco in the New York Times who suggests that: “the most serious charge against him is that he viewed the human world from a disdainful distance — watching, with a certain voyeuristic pleasure, as people botched their lives” (Delbanco, 2011). Indeed, Ahmad describes African Americans in this way: “The zanj

[black people in Arabic] embraces dirt and laziness as a protest; a protest of slaves that now persists as a lust for degradation, defying that injunction of all religions to keep clean” (281). It shows that Updike created a character that is not free of racism himself seeking through this provocative rhetoric to smash the myth of the exceptional and idealized America. About that, he declared in interview with the Academy of Achievement: “I wanted to write books that told everything I knew, that were fully about life in my tame band of it” (Updike, 2004).

To conclude, Ahmed’s choice of a Muslim identity is dictated by the search for refuge: “His exploration of his Islamic identity ends at the mosque. The mosque took him in as a child of eleven; it let him be born again” (99). The construction process of his religious identity is expressed symbolically and ritually through his predisposition for learning the precept of Islam even though he faces lots of challenges such as the fact of not speaking Arabic. Moreover, his distinctive features make him feel marginalized by both ethnic groups: the whites and the Arabs. This is why his identification goes essentially by religion than by reference to ethnicity; that is the dilemma he faces in his quest to construct his identity. Furthermore, Sheikh Rashid, the Muslim clergy, plays a key role in Ahmed's quest for identity and sense of belonging and makes his religious precepts more pervasive than his ethnic boundaries.

### **2.3. Narrative strategy in Updike’s *Terrorist***

In the previous section, the analysis of the novel under study is based on the socio-cultural approach. This section, however, seeks to examine *Terrorist* from a literary perspective focusing on the techniques used by Updike, with the aim to provide a more nuanced perception.

First of all, the narrative strategy refers to the selected ways by which a story is told and that suppose the junction of narrative techniques to construct a text in a way that can talk to the reader. The question that comes to one’s mind here is: “which kind of readers does the writer target? For Updike, it goes without saying that the mainstream American readership is his intended public.

The current section explores some aspects of Updike’s narrative choices concerning the plot structure, his point of view and the narrative time and space.

In his novel, Updike uses assorted narrative strategies that develop at a certain point in the plot by proceeding from a narrative architecture to a denouement. These strategies are seen first, through the description of space and characters, second by the condensation or aggravation of the events, third by a crescendo of a vivid, some time slow movement, and finally, by using a sophisticated aesthetic style that overlaps with a kind of lyrical prose that evoke nostalgia, soreness and frustration.

In fact, Updike narrative strategy is based on both objective and metaphorical descriptive acts that denude characters and bring aesthetically their material realities close to the readers. As he states in one of his article: “My only duty was to describe reality as it had come to me—to give the mundane its beautiful due” (Updike, 2004). Besides, his dense descriptive approach is more obvious in a vivid prose adopted to portray the spaces where the characters evolve such as the streets, the school as expressed in this excerpt:

“The halls of the high school smell of perfume and bodily exaltations, of chewing gum and impure cafeteria food, and of cloth-cotton - cotton, and wool and the synthetic materials of running shoes, warmed by young flesh. Between classes there is a thunder of movement; the noise is stretched thin over violence beneath, barely restrained” (7-8).

As Marcel Proust did, Updike resorts to sensation and resonant impression, sometime also using the first-person interior monologue to express Ahmed’s inner voice: “These devils seek to take away my God” (3) and many times through the third-person narration. His meticulous choice of words and expressions and his specific details are the hallmark of this novel. Moreover, without any temporal distortion between story time and narrative time, the writer tells the story with respect to the chronological order of events without any flashback or foreshadowing except for some passages in which he makes reference to the memory.

Furthermore, Updike uses the narrative to depict the impulses of religious alienation of the main character. Simultaneously, he fictionally deplores the religious taboos and the incongruity of reality and religious utopia. For example, he dedicates several paragraphs to invoke sin, heaven and devil. In an eclectic treatment, he oscillates

from free indirect style to direct speech and from lyric prose to documentary narration to help solidify his worldview.

According to Genette's notion of external focalization, Updike's narrative focuses especially on one character "Ahmed" the intended terrorist to define the profile and the motives of terrorist acts. Indeed, the novel as it sets up a polemic on religious interpretations and deals with issues of identity, sounds like a non-fictional work as indicated by James Wood: "Updike's style does not enable his dramatic functioning as a novelist, it actually nullifies it" (Wood, 2006). Additionally, other critics label him as a stylist who transcends substance and accuse his novel of lacking depth. However, the focalization on the indoctrinated Ahmed does not prevent the author from borrowing Jack's voice to impose allegorically his own point of view and perceptions about the so-called terrorists, life and the afterlife. In other words; the author could neither be neutral within the narrative game nor maintain distance between him as a writer and extremism as a phenomenon. In spite of the fine aesthetic developed by Updike, the novel is sprinkled by clichés as reflected in the excerpt:

"As Jack Levy sees it, America is paved solid with fat and tar, a coast-to-coast tar baby where we're all stuck. Even our vaunted freedom is nothing much to be proud of, with the commies out of the running; it just makes it easier for terrorists to move about, renting airplanes and vans and setting up web sites. Religious fanatics and computer geeks: the combination seems strange to his old-fashioned sense of the reason-versus faith divide. Those creeps who flew the planes into the World Trade Center had good technical educations. The ringleader had a German degree in city planning; he should have redesigned new prospect" (27).

Updike also portrays Ahmed as a rigid and one-dimensional character without any distress even as he readies himself to blast the tunnel as Michiko Kakutani remarks:

"Unfortunately, the would-be terrorist in this novel turns out to be a completely unbelievable individual: more robot than human being and such a cliché that the reader cannot help suspecting that Mr. Updike found the idea of such a person so incomprehensible that he at some point abandoned any earnest attempt to depict

his inner life and settled instead for giving us a static, one-dimensional stereotype” (Kakutani, 2006).

Paradoxically, in previous chapters Updike shows the ambivalence of Ahmad’s behavior and thought. He draws the teen as perplexed and torn between contrasted feelings related to his religious belief. This is evident when he muses, for instance, that his “own death will be just as small and final” (5) as “The deaths of insects and worms” (Ibid., 5) or when he asks “what evidence beyond the prophet’s blazing and divinely inspired words proves that there is a next? Where would it be hidden? Who would forever stoke Hell’s boilers? What infinite source of energy would maintain opulent Eden” (Ibid., 5).

The author’s also mirrors Ahmed’s ambivalence when he faces the temptations of hedonistic American society and the desire of the body in erotic scenes like when after watching Joryleen singer in her church choir, he glimpses of the “tops of her breasts...still glazed with the excitement and exertion of her singing” (67). Nonetheless, the description of the protagonist’s feelings remains unsatisfying. As a matter of fact, this high degree of fervor or stream of consciousness we often find in great novels written by canonical writers such as Feodor Dostoyevsky or Steven Zweig harms the dramatic aspects and the exciting part of the storytelling. For instance, Ahmad is intentionally given a monochronic identity to show how ready he is to what he imagines are the religious reason to commit terrorist acts. Wood comments:

“Ahmad has no personality, no quiddity as an eighteen-year-old American, so he is Updike's serf, ready for whatever the writer chooses to do with him. In Updike land, this means lyrical authorial commentary. Ahmad seems not to listen to music, or use a cell phone, or lust after girls, or go to movies, or read any books. He is simply and only a block of Islamic disgust” (Wood, 2006).

Another main point that should be mentioned is Updike’s use of contiguity between two contrasted cognitive tendencies. On the one hand, he uses a religious one perpetuated by Sheikh Rashid through his disciple and on the other, he makes use of a secular one backed up by Jack the counselor. In this narrative treatment, he tries to find intersections like the tendencies deploring the American life style based on consumerism and futility which, in his view “emits a stench of waste and greed, of

sensuality, and futility, of the despair and lassitude that come with ignorance of the inspired wisdom of the Prophet" (233). Nevertheless, after reading the novel, one gets the impression that the author even though denouncing throughout the narrative the dogmatic, frozen old religious text, attempts to humanize Ahmed, by perceiving him as a kind of hybrid product of heterogeneous American society and turning him into a victim of the system. In fact, Updike as attested by several critics is merciful with his characters and never condemns them. Indeed, the author peoples the text with ordinary characters submitted to no violent or vulgar treatment and in the extreme case he uses the sarcastic description as he did when portraying Beth, Jack's wife "His wife, Beth, a whale of a woman giving off too much heat through her blubber, breathes audibly beside him, her tireless little rasp of a snore extending into unconsciousness her daily monologue, her output of prattle" (20).

On the other hand, Updike explores the religious realm by slotting quotations from the Koran in the text in order to back up his narration along with his twisted interpretations of religion that show the punitive side of the Islam. In fact, all these moves harm the narrative architecture of the novel and make the storytelling in some way inconsistent as indicated previously. Notwithstanding, Wood writes:

"Updike is a pagan celebrant rather than a religious explorer. His impulse is mystically broad rather than theologically exact. He is not especially interested in questions of faith or doubt, because aesthetics can always be wheeled in to solve such questions: the world is uncomplicatedly God's, and it exists to be lyrically praised" (Ibid).

No matter what Updike's intention is, his narration is weakened by the architecture of the novel which is characterized by the artificiality of the simplistic polarity characters regarding their religious background, their false empathies and the lack of spontaneity in their way of thinking and acting. Nevertheless, other critics such as Pamela Mansutti argue that the plot is founded on paradoxical beliefs of the characters and that such rigidity is avoided in the novel:

"Despite the Manichean and stereotypical organization of the plot, Terrorist avoids ethical rigidity, equally distributes strengths and weaknesses among its characters and even finds in the spiritless and cynical Jack Levy the "savior"

who in the end, against all odds, prevents the catastrophe from happening. Levy's gesture disavows the violent ramifications of Ahmad's religion but it also reasserts the boy's spiritual innocence" (Mansutti, 2011:111-112).

The narrative treatment, the choice of characters and the timing make this literary work seem as if it is concocted under pressure of the fear of silence due to the 9/11 tragedy.

Considering all that was discussed so far in this chapter one concludes that the real strength of the novel lies in Updike's fluid prose and dense expressions although some critics label his works as over-stylized when he portrays everyday details whether concerning the ambivalence of characters or disturbing spaces he depicts.

The poet and novelist Jem Poster best sums up Updike's writing in *Terrorist* in an article published in the *Guardian*:

"Although the plot creaks a little, particularly in the novel's closing stages, this is a work of considerable distinction. Updike remains one of contemporary literature's most enviable stylists, the lucid economy of his prose often disguising, but never betraying, the remarkable complexity of his thought. And he also remains one of American society's most humane and balanced critics, his exasperation tempered by an undeniable love. It's a love of small things (...) a love which may, he implies, provide a frail bulwark against the larger and more furious passions that threaten the world". (Poster, 2006).

To sum up, this chapter tried to shed light on what could be perceived as cultural boundaries that Updike in his novel had come to portray. It examined important aspects of the distortions in the construction of identity in a multi-ethnic society and therefore all the motives that underlay the violence. Updike bold attempt to dig into the imagined terrorist world had concluded that the environment in which a person grows up influences the personality and forge his identity.

Updike's novel ends in a positive note when he ascribes the human empathy to Ahmed's behavior, the protagonist scheme to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel for the sake of an "Angry God", but in the end tries to convince himself to abandon his demonic project for the sake of a "Merciful God". Updike suggests that the cultural

misunderstanding and intolerance exacerbated after the events of 9/11 which lead to violence can be avoided by means of dialogue that the author has established all along the novel through the character of Jack Levy.

It is this spirit of intolerance described in Updike's *Terrorist* that Laila Halaby tried to address in her *Once in a promised land*.

## **Chapter III: *Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby**

### **Introduction**

The novel to be examined in this chapter is *Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby<sup>8</sup>. The latter, who was born in Beirut from a Jordanian father and an American mother and raised in Brooklyn, mirrors in her novel the identity-hybridity dilemma an Arab American couple have faced in their host land. This chapter will analyze what the novel depicts about their experience aftermath of 9/11, amplified by the effect of this tragedy, the discrimination, intolerance and other cultural boundaries which make their integration into the American society more doubtful.

In the following sections, the themes of integration, identity and ethnicity will be raised in order to disclose the impact of the displacement on the process of identity construction of the Arab American couple.

### **3.1. Laila Halaby cultural and cognitive perspectives**

The very title *Once in a Promised Land* reflects a state of disappointment, an “unhappy consciousness” towards “a promised land” with all its ideological, cultural and political articulations. The “unhappy consciousness” in this regard is the outcome of ontological antagonism between the belief of the self and the constraints of a multifaceted reality. As a result, Halaby’s main characters suffer all along the narration from an identity tearing and find themselves at the end in front of an existential deadlock.

While Updike, as an “outsider”, is keen on providing a partial interpretation of the experience of an Arab American character and therefore falling in a judgment value of an oriental culture, Halaby on the other hand identifies herself with an Arabic migrant couple who fail to find a place in an unwelcoming land. The writer depicts the vulnerability of the Arabic migrants who realize after the tragic events of 9/11 how false their dream is. In fact, Halaby is in more synchronization with her cultural belonging and closer to her culture as an Arab migrant than Updike who may be categorized as an

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<sup>8</sup> Halaby won PEN/Beyond Margins Award for her novel *West of the Jordan* (2003) and a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Authors selection for *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). Her novel *Once in a Promised Land* was also named by the Washington Post as one of the 100 best works of fiction for the year of 2007. Besides fiction, she writes poetry, folktales and stories for children.

orientalist approaching the Arab Muslim culture from outside. However, sometimes Halaby uses the contrast to show the ambivalence of her identity as expressed in her personal web site:

“In life and in stories I love contrasts and unlikely juxtapositions, which perhaps is the result of coming from two distinct cultures. I see artists as translators/interpreters who give us a glimpse at a situation or a person or a feeling in some more accessible medium. They can also offer us an eye into someone else’s world and help dispel stereotypes and misconceptions by tugging at that universal spot, the humanity within us all”.

Moreover, the author announces her references from the beginning as she entitled the novel *Once in a Promised Land* that alludes to religion. Unlike Updike who exploits the sacred references only to misinterpret them, Halaby uses them to illuminate the narrative. Indeed, she presents traditions and customs with the exclusion of religion and starts her narrative as a sort of grandmother’s tale using all traditional Arab story telling devices. In the ironical way of narrating, the *Promised Land* of the persecuted as mentioned in TORAH will become a nightmare and the picture will be tarnished after 9/11. In addition, space in the novel plays a very important role as a theme; in contrast with *Terrorist* where the protagonist is a product of socio-cultural exile, *Once in a Promised Land*’s psychological dimension is steeped in nostalgia, in the sense that the narration is based on the interaction between the space where the characters live now and a longing for the motherland they left behind.

Furthermore, rather than presenting an interpretation, Halaby’s describes the sad picture of being an Arab in America in the aftermath of September the 11th. The main characters of the novel do not seem to have power over their destiny. Besides, the other characters such as Penny, the waitress, or Jack Franks are suspicious, intolerant towards Arabs and Islamic cultures and reveal their fanatical enthusiasm to defend the nation even by transgressing the simple migrants’ rights, as Halaby raises awareness about the necessity to transcend a binary east/west frame of reference in order to avoid animosity and division.

### **3.2. The process of identity construction in Laila Halaby's *Once in Promised Land***

In the novel, Laila Halaby builds the plot around circumstances where the protagonists are confronted with two conflicting cultural models and where it is impossible to build a stable and consistent identity appreciated within a heterogeneous culture. This issue has always been a subject of research for a number of academics such as Camilleri and Malewska-Peyre, who try to approach some particular identity issues related to the legacy of colonization and domination relationships between different cultures prevailing in a society and the identity strategies adopted (Camilleri-Malewska-Peyre, 1997:41-67). To illustrate, the strategy adopted by the main characters in Halaby's novel is elaborated at the beginning as a reaction to the "repression" of their identity. The example of Jassim and Salwa Haddad shows the shifting from what Carmel Camilleri calls the "strategy of the simple coherence" (Camilleri, 1995:89) leading to a denial of identity, to a strategy based on "a complex coherence" (Ibid) where different identity references overlap and manifest just after the tragedy of September the 11th. This human tragedy generates a cognitive handicap against the foreign couple's construction of a lucid identity. Being under pressure, Jassim and Salwa adopt a pragmatic strategy that leads to building what Malewska-Peyre calls the "chameleon identity" (Ibid., 57). Indeed, this type of identity is a behavioral tactic adopted by the individual to acclimatize to a multicultural environment. In this case, it enables Salwa and Jassim to adjust themselves functionally in a complex socio-cultural reality and allows them to protect themselves from any aggressive act that could leave psychological wounds due to the atmosphere created by the 9/11 tragedy. Will they succeed in proceeding this way?

As asserted by some critics, avoiding the stereotypical image of "the Arab Muslim" as reflected by the American media (rituals, hijab, beard), mixing with a white American citizen (Jack the boyfriend), beside the nonchalance towards the people of color (the Latinos), can be interpreted as a chameleon attitude through which Salwa, the wife is symbolically seeking her citizenship. Thus, whiteness becomes a distinctive mark through which she determines her identity and belonging. At the same time, the couple isolates themselves from their environment and cut off all the links with other Arabs settling in America as an attitude of "repression" of their original identity. Evoking this case that we can call "a whiteness syndrome complex" within a sort of

“American cast system” Salwa is white but she is not white enough to avoid social discrimination. After all, she is an Arab with all stereotypes that goes with.

As an addition to the definition of identity suggested by the mentioned authors in the introduction of this chapter, Edmond Marc Lipiansky defines it as an inner consciousness, but also an external representation with which the subject is identified through a categorization and projection process based on some indices of appearance (Lipiansky, 2000:367).

In the novel, Halaby depicts the Arab American belonging through economic success of her main characters who believe in the American dream and tend to see themselves as a pure American product with no political commitment or link with their homeland (Jordan) except for the family relationship. In fact, the Arabic couple renounces their religious identity and adopts the same American way of life as a way towards assimilation into the American mainstream. This is clear in Jassim, Salwa’s husband, whom the reader meets through many inner reflections that disclose a degree of self knowledge that grows ever more distant from the original belief system:

“Jassim delighted in the stillness the morning offered, a time before emotions were awake, a time for contemplation. This day was no exception as he got up, washed his face, brushed his teeth, and relieved himself, the beginning of a morning ritual as close to prayer as he could allow. His thoughts hovered over the internal elements of self and world rather than the external. Jassim did not believe in God, but he did believe in Balance. At five o’clock, with the day still veiled, Jassim found balance” (3).

The middle class, professional, religiously neutral profile of the protagonists is chosen by the author in order to convey that no “odd political perspective” can trouble their process in joining the melting pot of the new land. As far as Salwa’s profile is concerned, she was born in the United States, settled down in Arizona with her husband, and she is a banker as well as an estate agent. She saves a lot of money to assist her family in Jordan. Jassim, on the other hand has a successful career as a hydrologist for the Tucson water company. Both jobs provide a certain degree of comfort and well-being to the main characters. Therefore, all conditions seem to be available to achieve their goal of perfect integration into American society.

However, the peaceful life of the couple changes drastically with the tragic event of 9/11 since they suddenly become subject to suspicion and harassment everywhere. To illustrate, Halaby uses sometimes irony while depicting the procedures adopted by the American authorities at the airports, public places and offices to show the extent to which these outrageous acts can violate basic human rights. Another example that can be mentioned in this sense is the atmosphere of the shopping center that is seized by a terrorist phobia. As a result, snipers are placed on the roof and the staff receives instruction to warn about any suspicious activity. The couple responds to this new atmosphere differently; at the beginning, Jassim minimizes the repercussions of 9/11 on his life as he perceives himself as a white American. He convinces himself that his social position as a senior manager in a quiet important firm will save him from any harassment. Later on, he understands that he is totally wrong and the fascination towards the host land becomes astonishment: “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” (165).

On the other hand, Salwa’s reaction to the effects of 9/11 on how Arab Americans are perceived is markedly different. She becomes more nervous, lost, susceptible and overreacts to any unfriendly acts such as the incidents at the Tucson. The couple discover with anguish that the American dream they thought they had been living had become an illusion. Consequently, they find themselves in a dilemma; to go back home or to challenge the situation.

Through Salwa’s voice, Halaby expresses this deep anxiety when she says that “we cannot live here (in America) anymore.” (54). In this unfriendly atmosphere, the itinerary of the couple is no longer unwavering for two main causes. First, the wife betrays her husband with a white American and hides her pregnancy. Secondly, the husband gets involved in another affair and hides a tragic accident in which a boy is killed as is torn by guilt as a consequence. In addition, Jassim will be subject to a “witch hunt” and will be fired from his job for the simple reason that he is an Arab working in sensitive field and this represents a potential threat for the national security and for the clients.

If the repercussions of 9/11 events are disastrous to the identity construction process, internal paradoxical feelings and attitudes of the protagonists (their lives and

their searching for emotional refuge) reveal the fragility of their relationship. This fact deepens the gap between them and increases the general crisis of confusion, guilt, and anxiety and interrupts therefore, the assimilation process into the American society. The hostility of the American society after 9/11 portrayed by the author is not the only thematic preoccupation of the novel. Beyond any reductionist reading of a complex reality that reduces the protagonists to simple persecuted people following this national tragedy, it is important to take into account the cultural dimension of the central dilemma, that of their identity crisis and the cultural ability to be easily integrate to the American society. The main characters carry along with them their cultural background, their social and affective frustrations, their political failure, and their anger towards their homeland as indicated by the author when she draws the pathway of Jassim:

“At the end of two years he received his master’s and went home (Jordan) puffed up to work at the Ministry of Water Resources. In spite of his degree and swelling ideas, in the ministry he dangled from the lowest rung, with less education than most, so not only was he passed over for the interesting projects, but his ideas for improvement of existing projects were largely ignored” (62).

It is obvious that the author attempts to voice the silenced injustices aftermath 9/11 and denounce the demonizing ethnic and racial discourses in America but at the same time she reveals the ambivalence of protagonists’ psychology. Halaby reflects thereafter the mitigated feeling of Salwa towards America in this excerpt:

“All those years of schizophrenic reaction to American culture, disdain for the superficial, which she had buried with each new purchase and promotion, a spray of loathing she had denied in order to justify her current arrangement- It all burst forward as if she were seeing it for the first time, as though she had not spent the past nine years living this very life” (54).

Halaby’s plot reimagines the struggle for integration in the new society, where the characters are deceived by false promises, desperate, abandoned and torn between the original culture and the values of the new land. For instance, the novel expresses a kind of bitterness felt by immigrants who are induced into an illusionary belief of belonging to a land that rejects them because of their ethnicity no matter how hard they try to dismiss their original cultural and religious values as well as their linguistic

reference. Halaby's in these circumstances questions the American consciousness regarding the meaning of belonging to the homeland, as Salwa reflects:

“Only the America that pulled at her was not the America of her birth, it was the exported America of Disneyland and hamburgers, Hollywood and the Marlboro man, and therefore impossible to find. Once in America, Salwa still searched and tripped and bought smaller and sexier pyjamas in the hope that she would one day wake up in that promised land”(49).

Despite the fact that the narrative incriminates the American promise for being behind the couple's misfortune, it is in fact their attempt to abandon their original identities that causes their feelings of guilt and failure and which deprives them from reconnecting to a sense of home. The issue of belonging is a crucial dilemma since the wife has three nationalities (Jordanian, Palestinian and American) but still feels a sense of non-belonging even though she expresses through her flashbacks her ties with her original land. With certain fatalism, Halaby considers that the displacement of Salwa is a malediction. She says: “Salwa hadn't fully realized yet was that in breathing her first breath on American soil, she had been cursed” (Ibid., 49). Using all the metaphoric tools, the author provides a description of the extent of the dependence to this “damned land” of voluntary exile:

“Because while place of birth does not alter genetic material, it does stitch itself under the skin and stay attached by virtue of invisible threads, so that if a person leaves that place for somewhere else (whether because she's been kicked out and forcibly sent away or because she is simply returning to the home of her parents), there is always an uncomfortable tugging as the silken (in her case) threads are pulled taut” (Ibid., 49).

Additionally, she elucidates, the complex situation in which the migrant finds himself; stuck, carrying with him the pain of displacement, and unable to build his own identity beyond its original referential values:

“if the person returns to her place of birth, especially after a great deal of time has elapsed, quite often the threads have knotted or tangled somewhere between here and there, there and her, causing the person countless awkward moments. Sometimes the knot of crossed threads becomes so thick that it creates a painful

and constant yanking no matter where the person finds herself. At that point the best thing to do may be to snip off the threads completely, but that is a last resort, as it is painful and traumatic” (Ibid., 49).

Besides, the author emphasizes that many people opt for the excision when they try to “find the spot where the threads were originally stitched and have them severed by choice, regardless of tangling” (Ibid., 49).

However, when it comes to Salwa as immigrant who tries to reconcile herself with her divided condition by adopting the “chameleon identity” as “other people, acrobats generally, who manage their threads quite well, stitching patterns behind them so as not to be pulled and yanked and tripped by them” (49), how she feels helpless as expressed in this passage: “Salwa was neither acrobat nor pals with a clever surgeon, and as a result, America pulled and yanked on her from a very young age, forever trying to reel her in” (Ibid., 49).

The novel ends with a symbolic note reproducing the tale of the Gholā, the mythical oriental creature that eats her children. For the author, “the hairy hideous Gholā” refers to the unforgiving and intolerant America who mistreats her children. But beside this torn picture, Halaby in her nostalgic rhetoric makes use of large load political symbols about Palestine<sup>9</sup> in those terms:

“They say that once upon a time a peasant girl was born far from olive trees and falafel stands in a land where fathers- and often mothers too- labored so that their children could change their fates. She was born to parents who were refugees from their real home, a land snatched away and reworked, a story taken and rewritten” (331).

Immigrant people are imagined to remain psychologically fragile and vulnerable because they remain strongly attached to their origins and they are emotionally hunted by their past. That is why identity and belonging issues are problematic especially in the American social context where “racialization systems” in effect as well as the mainstream reactions to a certain political events deepen their wounds and jeopardize the acculturation/assimilation process. This is what the author

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<sup>9</sup> 70% of the population of Jordan are Palestinians which means that the Palestinian cause is part of their national concern.

tries to portray in the novel. On the other hand, Jassim borrows Laila Halaby's voice in asserting that "Jordan pumps in the blood" to express in an unequivocal way his deep attachment to his homeland even though he remains fascinated by the American dream.

### **3.3. The narrative strategy in Laila Halaby's *Once in Promised Land*:**

Laila Halaby transcends the 9/11 theme to invoke other aspects, using it as a background to deal with issues such as identity crisis, homeland sickness, cultural belonging, and Arabic Diaspora assimilation into the American society as well as other subjects related to Arab women status in the Middle Eastern societies. The novel is in many ways also a protest against these traditions, both religious and cultural. Indeed, in *Once in Promised Land* Immigrant people are imagined to remain psychologically fragile. This liminality is seen in her narrative style that switches between realist narration and lyrical Arabic prose traditions or in her frequent slowing of the narrative time to allow for impressions and meditations. The writer shifts between description and narration as she disables the narrative time or slows the tempo of the narrative down as in:

"Awake before his alarm, Jassim got out of bed and went to the bathroom, hoping that movement would force the repeating images from his mind. His actions were automatic, but his brain seized on picture after picture, humans leaping from impossible heights, plumes of smoke filling the air and then charging down the narrow streets. He wondered what it smelled like. Ash? Dust? Burning steel? Were the smells of people drowned by the deaths of those two buildings? The buildings didn't actually die, though, did they? No, they were not living creature....He walked through the dim house, relishing the embrace of darkness" (19).

In this context, the narrative and the description differ in terms of objectives, mixing a chronological sequence of events with the intersection of meditative self reflection and interrogation. Sometimes, Halaby chooses dialogue and moves away temporarily from the narrative in order to give the opportunity to the characters to reveal themselves and express directly their feelings without her mediation as syncopated long dialogues as the one Salwa and Jassim have where they comment on the behaviour of an overfriendly shop assistant:

- “Meaning?”
- “Meaning she understands what we are going through. She offered me a gift certificate consolation prize.”
- “Did you take it?”
- “No.”
- “Why not? That could have been Lina’s present.”
- “Jassim, you can’t atone for the stupidity of people with things. Stupid, stupid, stupid.”
- “Stupid and macho,” (32).

Frequently, Halaby uses a certain poetic prose cadence with short sentences while slipping Arabic words into an English text in a hybridization process that recall the origins of the author. The following excerpt illustrates this tendency:

“Amal [Hope in Arabic].

Jassim rolled it around in his mind as he finished his last strokes.

Hope meant You could see tomorrow.

Hope.

He squatted in the pool after his last lap, submerged to his neck, and thought that if he and Salwa were ever to have a daughter, perhaps they could name her Amal” (46).

Moreover, the cultural duality of the novelist’s profile is perceptible while slotting folk tales in her narration so as to express the subtle thread linking her with the homeland. From the beginning, Halaby announces allegiance by this prelude: “Kanya ma kan fi kadeemaz-zaman” (Once upon a time). This temporal shift is a nostalgic return to the past through memory and an expression of negation of the present while enduring identity tearing because of the burden of “Self-imposed” exile exacerbated by the 9/11 tragedy’s impact. At the same time, the novel embodies psychological trauma due to the tearing between belonging to the homeland and the aspiration to be assimilated into the new world. Besides, Halaby creates a dramatic tale about America in gloomy circumstances and furnishes it with disoriented characters seeking a place in an unwelcoming land.

As far as the themes of the narratives are concerned, the strongest and the most highlighted in the novel is displacement. Halaby sheds light through her description the symbolic meaning of the place. That is to say; *Once in a Promised Land* embodies this realistic and symbolic shifting from the Jordanian desert to the Arizona desert. In fact, the desert does not only refer to the physical environment but it also reflects the image of the family warmth, familiar smells and colors as well as harshness. Water, is also another symbol which means fertility and life. It is another component of the sacred used by Halaby since it is cited in the quranic text. Water and desert are the threads that link her with her homeland. Thereby, Halaby's use of detail and wide metaphors create a substantial, multifaceted narrative based on a strategy that intertwines the sacred and the secular.

Generally speaking, it seems that the novel is based the biography of the novelist. With her flashback style, she employs her own childhood, adolescence and experiences. This necessarily provides us with paradoxical pictures of an irreconcilable type of love stories and marriage, of success and failure of Jordanian women torn between two cultural spaces.

Furthermore, the novel provides free space for contemplation and self-criticism regarding women status. During the process of the destruction of stereotypes related to Arab women, the author positions herself in the third person who dreams of gender equality, social justice and building dreams within the American society. Unlikely, she comes out of this displacement experience with a feeling of bitterness and exclusion expressed through Salwa's voice. In this context, the repatriation embodies these feelings of suffering due to the cultural paradox between the new world (America) and the traditional one (Jordan).

Concerning the problematics of gender in *Once in a Promised Land*, many Arab American Women's narratives raise many questions. First, because it is a new field that hasn't yet achieved the necessary maturity. Some critics such as the Jordanian short story writer and critic Iyad Nassar considers in his essay *The Jordanian Anglophone fiction* that Arab women writers in particular still use autobiography as a way to voice their suffering and protest against the stereotypes assigned to Arabs in westerner societies. Secondly, because of the thematics where they are centered already on the feminine sentiment and lack a certain degree of audacity in the dealings with taboos in

Arabic patriarchal societies (sexuality, religious and political issues). On the other hand, it seems that Halaby employs in her novel oriental exoticism and evokes the traditional relationship dilemma of Arab men and women to impress American opinion with the aim of recognition.

Last but not least, the novel also encompasses several turning points in the protagonists' lives which add complexity to the plot such as Salwa's abortion, the accident, Evan's death, and Salwa's affair with Jack. In other words, it is possible to argue that betrayal and guilt are fundamental in the novel since they lead to the complication of the plot. For instance, Salwa feels deceived or betrayed by America to the extent of comparing that country to "Ghola" the evil mythic creature in Arab fairytales. In addition, Salwa's betrayal represents the Aristotelian "Hamartia" as in Greek tragedy. Yet, Jack, even though brutally hurt Salwa, he is a sort of salvation or "Deus ex machina" that releases her from agony since he is the dominant reason behind cutting the thread tiding her to a false American dream. Indeed, he performed the same role of the other Jack of Updike's *Terrorist*.

To sum up, besides all aspects of Halaby's work, the novel mainly expresses two states of feelings. On the one hand, there is racial fear and anxiety while on the other hand; there is an intrinsic failure of the characters. Thus, the novel mirrors the general anxiety among Muslims and Arabs due to the 9/11 tragedy especially after the news about aggressive acts and verbal transgression committed here and there as well as the American administration's implementation of a policy of fear as a persuasive acts against any terrorist threat. Unlikely, this policy leaves a wound in the psyche of Muslim minorities and exacerbates the animosity and collective division that overcome the national borders. Additionally, it reveals the failure of the main characters to transcend their intrinsic handicap as far as their escape from destiny is concerned. Salwa runs away from the weight of the patriarchal society where the tribal customs are rooted in the society and Jassim flees the country because of his disenchantment with the policy prevailing in his mother land (Jordan).

In fact, what makes the novel an outstanding work is the fact that Laila Halaby neither provides answers nor happy endings for her characters who seek salvation to their existential deadlock. This means that the desire of co-existing involves challenges and puts these characters in jeopardy.

## Conclusion

The 9/11 tragedy is a turning point in the reconfiguration of relations between West and East. If the “East” has always represented a special fascination in the Western imaginary, the “West” has also been particularly influential for populations of the East in terms of lifestyle and rationality. Throughout this dissertation, I tried to address the issue of Arab American identity representation by examining the characters and the plots of the two novels *Terrorist* by John Updike and *Once in Promised Land* by Laila Halaby. The specificities of both works are the outcome of two different cultural and cognitive perspectives. One belongs to the West and the other still torn between the east and the west. The former tries to understand the motives of instigators acts while the latter is more concerned with psychological injuries left by the American hostility. To achieve their goals and persuade the audience, both authors use different narrative strategies. In addition, I tried to demonstrate that the displacement and the integration into the society is not an easy process because of several reasons. The most important one is the clash between two cultures and two reference values and their impact on the psychology of the immigrant who is weakened by the exile and the hostility of the American mainstream after 9/11. Even though I do not completely agree with Huntington assertion, I believe that there are cultural boundaries shaped throughout the history by stereotypes and preconceived ideas about the other cultures. On the other hand, both authors highlight the feelings of tearing that are felt by the characters the thing that makes their assimilation into the American society quite random. However, it is not only these exogenous factors that have impacted their assimilation, there are also intrinsic factors relating to their personal failure and deception whether in their country of origin for Halaby’s characters, or their marginal environment where they evolve for Updike’s characters.

Besides, I indicated that Arab American characters adopt different strategies in their process of integration. In Halaby’s novel, characters adopt what Malewska-Peyre calls “*a chameleon strategy*” that represses their original identity in their way of living in adaptive attitude, believing that Identity is an inner consciousness and also an external representation to which the subject is identified as asserted by Edmond Marc Lipiansky. That is to say; Salwa and Jassim try to adapt themselves to the American lifestyle with no external religious belonging signs; mixing at the beginning with middle class neighborhoods and avoiding lower class ones.

Finally, as Etienne Balibar mentions “Identity is never a peaceful acquisition” (Balibar, 1995: 186). In fact, the process of identity construction in *Once in a Promised Land* is extremely influenced by the stereotypes and the attitudes of the American mainstream and official policy. For instance, the occurrence of an event of great magnitude such as 9/11 turns the order governing the relationship of foreign communities in America upside down. To clarify, in Halaby’s novel Jassim is always called to prove his innocence and discipline otherwise he is suspected and labeled a public threat. Halaby listed the cases of discrimination in public places to indicate that the external appearance of an immigrant in America is fatal for the destiny of their integration no matter how westernized he is. This racial discrimination sets up boundaries between an insider and outsider. Moreover, in Updike’s novel, it is obvious that religion is imperative in identity construction of the protagonist. The author states that the latter takes refuge in religion in order to overcome an identity crisis and to construct an identity in reaction to repulsive values that prevail in the American society. Updike concludes that the discussed identity is built on the basis of religious indoctrination entertained by a feeling of exclusion which is the effect of an American system of racial segregation. In other words; the writer believes that since 9/11 the world has witnessed a sort of shaping and strengthening religious identity as a reaction to the ethnic categorization system but he concludes that the adherence to Islam is an impediment of integration into the American melting pot.

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