

## THE AMERICAN DREAM REVISITED: THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL IN THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST AND ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND

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### ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how Mohsin Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Laila Halaby in *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) debunk the myth of the American Dream in their post-9/11 novels. Set in the tumultuous political landscape of the post-9/11 era, both novels try to capture the loss and the angst felt by Muslim characters owing to a sudden emergence of Islamophobic/xenophobic rhetoric and indiscriminate labelling emanating from official and unofficial discourses alike. Drawing on Tzvetan Todorov's theory of narratology, the paper sheds light on the close affinity between the novels' plot structures. Although the paper does not illustrate a strict application of Todorov's theory, Hamid and Halaby, it is argued, cast their plots in the framework of unrequited love or faltering personal relationships to simultaneously depict the Muslim characters' deteriorating relationship with America, and ultimately the crumbling of their American Dream in post-9/11 America.

**Keywords:** American Dream, Islamophobia, narratology, 9/11.

### INTRODUCTION

Who would have imagined anyone capable of hurting America at the zenith of its economic and military might? Few, if not none, would be the answer.

America emerged as the number one uncontested superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a change in the geopolitical map of the world that heralded the rise of a New World Order led unchallengedly by the United States. President Bush the father celebrated this looming change in his speech to the United Nations in 1990<sup>1</sup>. Delivering his speech on the threshold of a new century, the United States dreamt about prosperity and relentless progress for all humanity. Eleven years later, just at the turn of the twenty-first century, such dreams turned into a terrifying nightmare. The attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 constitute a watershed in recent history because the United States found itself entangled in yet another war: the so-called war on terror. The latter has now assumed global proportions, supplanting the Red Scare of the post-Second World War by the fear of the rise of radical Islam. The attack on America was regarded by many as an attack on the Free World and the democratic values it champions.

In the realm of literature, canonical writers in America and elsewhere have fictionalised the traumatic events of 9/11, showing by so doing how the attacks have scarred the collective

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<sup>1</sup> In his United Nations Address in 1990, George H. W. Bush emphasised that "The United Nations can help bring about a new day, a day when these kinds of terrible weapons and the terrible despots who would use them are both a thing of the past. It is in our hands to leave these dark machines behind, in the Dark Ages where they belong, and to press forward to cap a historic movement towards a new world order and a long era of peace" (Bush, 1990).

consciousness of America. John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) are two examples that spring to mind instantly. Notwithstanding Updike's and DeLillo's attempts to come to grips with the disillusionment resulting from the tragic events, both writers have been responsible for reviving orientalist stereotypes, which resurged in tandem with anti-Muslim sentiments accompanying America's war on terror<sup>2</sup>. The result was a skewed and a biased representation of Islam and Muslims.

On the other hand, Muslim writers writing in English have tried to show that 9/11 has affected Muslims too. Their writings may thus be deemed to constitute a counter discourse to the dominant discourse emanating from the *centre*. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Once in a Promised Land* were published in the post-9/11 era, which is characterised by a resurgence of a neo-orientalist rhetoric and a marked increase in Islamophobic sentiments. Both novels deal explicitly with the terror attacks and how they have come to bear on the lives of Muslim characters. More importantly, they likewise refer explicitly to the difficulty of living in America and the crumbling of the characters' American Dream in the wake of the attacks. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is about the pain of unrequited love: a story about Changez's mutual attraction to and repulsion by (Am)Erica. Similarly, *Once in a Promised Land* is about Jassim's and Salwa's crumbling marriage and ultimately the crumbling of their American Dream. In this paper, it is therefore argued that Hamid and Halaby deliberately structured their plots around faltering personal relationships to foreshadow the Muslim characters' broken American Dream and their eventual break with America. Hence, a textual and a structural analysis of the novels will unravel how the personal—faltering relationships—and the political—the collapse of the characters' American Dream—and the eventual break with America, are entwined in an allegorical nexus of meanings.

Both texts revolve around pursuit, attainment, and eventual loss of a woman/man. To illuminate the relationship between the *personal* and the *political*, the paper draws on Todorov's narratological model since both novels readily lend themselves to it.

The focus in this paper is on the novels' narrative "grammar". Using Tzvetan Todorov's schema of propositions, it is thus argued that the novels' structures, which revolve around faltering personal relationships in effect parallel the deteriorating political situation after 9/11, a deterioration that symbolises the end of the characters' American Dream. When analysing the narrative structure of literary works, Todorov draws a parallel between the elements of a literary work and the elements of language. For instance, he suggests that characters be associated with nouns, their attributes with adjectives, and their actions with verbs so as to uncover the "grammar", the *langue*, or the formula, which structures these literary works

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<sup>2</sup> In the case of *Terrorist*, "most of the verses that Updike has gathered are about the Divine fury and anger at the infidels and the sinful, thereby contributing to the general perception, as peddled by the American media, that Islam is an other-worldly religion that relies on terror alone to convert people" (Awan, 2010, p. 528). As for *Falling Man*, "One of the important aspects of Orientalism is that the Orientalist often considers himself as a somehow omniscient narrator that speaks and represents the Orientals. . . Don DeLillo takes the same approach through his use of narrative mode; he speaks authoritatively and negatively about the Orient in essentialist terms. . . As a result, the narrative of the story does not transmit a set of facts about the real world of the characters, rather it is constructed and produced as a result of writer's preferences and within the dominant discourse" (Seyed Mohammad Marandi, 2012, pp. 69-70).

(Tyson, 2006, p. 226). The basic plot structure consists of the following sequence: attribution-action-attribution. An example of a sequence may thus be as follows: the “protagonist starts out with an attribute (for example, he is unloved), and by means of an action (he seeks love) that attribute is transformed (he is loved or, at least, has learned something important as a result of his quest)” (Tyson, 2006, p. 227).

In the case of the of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Once in a Promised Land*, the action can be reduced to a seek-find-lose formula, which is the *langue* underlying the structure of both texts, as it were. The thing sought after can be an object, a state, a condition, or a person. This formula, it is suggested, operates on two levels: the personal and the political. Put otherwise, the main characters’ seek-find-lose love journey functions as an allegory for their seek-find-lose American Dream, which is made impossible by the fast changing political landscape in America after 9/11. Towards the end of the novels, an aura of loss and despair still reigns because the characters’ attributes remain unchanged. Incensed by the post-9/11 anti-Muslim rhetoric, Changez quits his lucrative job and returns to Pakistan; (*Am*)*Erica*, his object of fascination, is lost forever. Jassim becomes a suspect in the wake of 9/11; he eventually loses his job and probably Salwa, who in turn miscarries, has an affair out of wedlock with Jake, who assaults her towards the end of the book, leaving her bathing in a pool of blood, her desire to go back to Jordan crushed.

### **“IN THE FOREGROUND SHIMMERED” (*AM*)*ERICA*: UNREQUITED LOVE IN *THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST***

Changez travels from Lahore to New York, then from the latter to the former before he decides to abandon (*Am*)*Erica*. Lahore is a typical traditional Eastern centre, while New York is the epitome of Western cosmopolitan progress. Changez’s to-ing and fro-ing between the two cities gives him a chance to straddle two distinct cultures. Having sampled first-hand both cultures, he therefore becomes the embodiment of the values that they both offer, however contradictory they may be. Owing to a marked decline of his family’s social and economic status, Changez delights in the prospects that a university education in America promises to offer. For him, education in a prestigious American university is an opportunity to meet new people and immerse himself in a culture that represents almost everything the West stands for. Changez’s American Dream operates on two levels: on the one hand, he is lured by a country that epitomises ample opportunity, presumably based on ideals of equality as well as equity; on the other hand, he meets the woman whom he believes can make his experience more meaningful and worthwhile. However, his to-ing and fro-ing between the two cities reveals to him facts to which he has been hitherto oblivious. He ultimately breaks with the country and the woman he loves, and returns to his native country. In the wake of 9/11, he is drawn to the limelight due to a dramatic rise in Islamophobia; most importantly, he becomes conscious of his background, and indeed his difference. Three actions structure the novel’s plot: “to seek”, “to find”, and “to lose”. Changez’s quest for (*Am*) *Erica* is eventually crowned by the fleeting success he achieves on two levels: first, his development of a quasi-intimate relationship with Erica, and, second, his improved economic situation when he becomes an Underwood Samson agent. Despite his new-found romance and social status, he soon becomes disillusioned after the events of 9/11, and ultimately loses both the woman and the country he supposedly loves.

*AmErica* is a *double entendre*, which symbolises Changez’s unrequited love for both a country and a woman. The fusion of the two love stories constitutes a framework that enables Mohsin Hamid to allegorise the gradual disintegration of Changez’s world, and indeed the

disintegration of his American Dream. Like Gatsby, whose American Dream—paralleled by his love and quest for Daisy—streams in green light on the opposite shore of a bay, Erica shimmers in Changez's world. The following passage captures Changez's fascination with the girl, a fascination that marks the beginning of his quest, the "seek" part of the *langue* governing the structure of the text:

. . . in the foreground shimmered Erica, and observing her gave me enormous satisfaction. She had told me that she hated to be alone, and I came to notice that she rarely was. She attracted people to her; she had presence, an uncommon magnetism. Documenting her effect on her habitat, a naturalist would likely have compared her to a lioness: strong, sleek, and invariably surrounded by her pride (Hamid, 2007, pp. 21-22).

From an onomastic point of view, the meaning of the name "Eric/Erica", along its various spellings in other languages, reveals much about the magnetism that the girl exudes in the novel. Originally an old Nordic name—*Eirikr*—it means, among other things, "honoured ruler" (Eric, s.d.). Erica is an allegory for America; they both seduce and snare those who seek their courtship. The name "Erica", then, resonates powerfully with America's unipolar rule over the world. Its domination is uncontested and is set to continue that way, or so it seems. Hamid employs an animalistic diction to describe this predatory and domineering nature of (*Am*)Erica: she is "strong, sleek", and, "invariably surrounded by her pride"; like "a lioness", she commands respect and fear.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, America emerged as the world's watchdog over international politics. The economic, military, and cultural influence that America exercises over the world is almost indisputable. Interestingly, if the unipolarity that currently characterises world politics does anything, it militates against the supposedly democratic rhetoric that America seems to have always championed. The New World Order has only confirmed its superiority and autocracy, "documenting", to borrow Hamid's words, "her effect on her habitat". Modern history still documents America's parenting role, providing "security and garrison troops" in Japan and Germany, "the world's second and largest economies" (Ikenberry, 2004, p. 609). The same thing holds true for Russia, which is in "a quasi-formal security partnership with the United States", and China, which "has accommodated itself to US dominance" (Ikenberry, 2004, p. 609). On the back of this incontestable influence and domination, America has forced the world into its "unipolar age" (Ikenberry, 2004, p. 609).

America was catapulted into prominence and influence in world affairs following the two world wars. It has become an example of economic development and relentless progress, and indeed a land of ceaseless opportunities and dreams. The American Dream has, however, provoked deep ambivalence. Optimists still laud America for providing economic freedom and limitless opportunities for all, and for embodying democratic ideals like freedom of speech and human rights. Critics, like Scott Fitzgerald and John Steinbeck, by contrast, have exposed the dark side of the American Dream, which, for many, has turned out to be a mere mirage shimmering in the distance, just like Erica.

Notwithstanding the charm she exerts on those surrounding her, especially on Changez, Erica is incapable of living peacefully. She is wounded at heart, a wound that leaves Changez languishing in the shackles of unrequited love:

. . . it was clear Erica needed something that I— even by consenting to play the part of a man not myself—was unable to give her. In all likelihood she longed for her

adolescence with Chris, for a time before his cancer made her aware of impermanence and mortality. Perhaps the reality of their time together was as wonderful as she had, on more than one occasion, described to me. Or perhaps theirs was a past all the more potent for its being imaginary. I did not know whether I believed in the truth of their love; it was, after all, a religion that would not accept me as a convert. But I knew that she believed in it, and I felt small for being able to offer her nothing of comparable splendor instead (Hamid, 2007, pp. 113-114).

From the beginning of the novel, Hamid foreshadows Changez's doomed relationship with (*Am*)*Erica*. Erica shimmers "in the foreground" only to dim in the background, as it were. Their relationship is doomed, for Erica's inner light can no longer show her the way. Chris, her dead ex-boyfriend, still haunts her whole being. The meaning of the name 'Chris' reveals interesting associations that may throw more light on their doomed relationship. Onomastically, 'Chris', which is short for Christopher, of Greek origin, means "bearer of Christ" (Christopher, s.d.), referring to legends about a saint Christopher, who carried the young Jesus across a river. Metaphorically, it symbolises somebody who bears Christ in his heart. Chris' death foreshadows Erica's spiritual and physical death, making an intimate union between her and Changez a remote possibility. Changez knows deep down that he is chasing a mere mirage and competing with an invisible, dead rival:

I did not say that the same could be said of her when she spoke of Chris; I did not say it because this fact elicited in me mixed emotions. On the one hand it pleased me as her friend to see her so animated, and I knew, moreover, that it was a mark of affection that she took me into her confidence in this way—I had never heard her discuss Chris when speaking to someone else; on the other hand, I was desirous of embarking upon a relationship with her that amounted to more than friendship, and I felt in the strength of her ongoing attachment to Chris the presence of a rival—albeit a dead one—with whom I feared I could never compete (Hamid, 2007, pp. 81-82).

Metaphorically, Chris' death can be read as the demise of religion in America. While (*Am*)*Erica* cannot reconcile with her past following Chris' death, she similarly cannot maintain her relationship with Changez. This said, at this point, Changez is still seeking a stronger relationship with her in that he harbours an optimism—although the latter borders on a pious hope—that it might just work out for him against all the odds imposed by her being haunted by Chris' memory.

Read in the context of the post-9/11 Islamophobic/xenophobic atmosphere, the relationship between Changez and Erica is based on the clash of civilisations thesis and the incompatibility of Islam and the secular West, which appears to be lost after having expunged all forms of divine authority. Without Chris, Erica is lost and needs to stay in a mental institution to recover. It is accordingly suggested that (*Am*)*Erica* cannot embrace Changez, a Muslim fundamentalist in the making, because the love between Chris and Erica is, "after all, a religion" that will not "accept" him "as a convert" (Hamid, 2007, p. 114). Erica's nostalgia for Chris acts as a bulwark against her loving Changez back. Her life orbits the haunting memory of a dead person, who left her stranded in limbo, incapable of looking towards the future.

Changez's American Dream begins in his Princeton years. Following an unexpected scene on the beach in Greece, where he holidays with his fellow Princetonians, he begins to contemplate rosy prospects for him and Erica. He is gradually ushered into the ranks of the powerful, of the generation that will shape the future of America. In Greece particularly, he

begins to experience a more intimate relationship with Erica. In the scene on the beach, Erica bares her “breasts to the sun” (Hamid, 2007, p. 23), increasing Changez’s craving for physical intimacy. He reads the gesture as a special invitation for him to become more intimate with her because out of all his classmates she singled him out for such an exclusive spectacle. He believes that she has started warming to him, especially that none of their female companions has dared to do the same. Besides this quasi-intimacy he feels, Changez begins to live his American Dream when he begins sharing personal dreams with Erica. Now, he believes that his quest is about to be crowned with a glorious conquest:

Erica said that she wanted to be a novelist. Her creative thesis had been a work of long fiction that had won an award at Princeton; she intended to revise it for submission to literary agents and would see how they responded. Normally, Erica spoke little of herself, and tonight, when she did so, it was in a slightly lowered voice and with her eyes often on me. I felt—despite the presence of our companions, whose attention, as always, she managed to capture—that she was sharing with me an intimacy, and this feeling grew stronger when, after observing me struggle, she helped me separate the flesh from the bones of my fish without my having to ask (Hamid, 2007, p. 29).

This public nudity act is forbidden in Islam, but Changez appears to support it wholeheartedly in that at this stage he wants to “submerge his identity into Western identity” (Tariq, 2014). Oblivious to her severe emotional state, Changez’s hopes for a union with her border on the delusional, for he continues to labour under illusion when they go back to New York. Nothing physical happens in Greece, but she now occupies much of his thoughts. Back in New York, she gives him her phone number, a gesture that makes him feel happy because he has “struck up an acquaintance with a woman” with whom he “was well and truly smitten” (Hamid, 2007, pp. 29-30). Changez’s life is consequently turned upside down because he feels the excitement of a new life coursing through his veins: “my excitement about the adventures my new life held for me had never been more pronounced” (Hamid, 2007, p. 30).

Being the economic hub of United States, New York functions as the prototype cosmopolitan centre where Changez can fulfil his American Dream, which has thus far manifested itself in his Princeton education and in his relationship with Erica. Being a Princeton graduate, he is recruited as an analyst by Underwood Samson, a consultancy firm, which offers him a very high salary. The firm then becomes his gateway to success. Put otherwise, Princeton gives him the opportunity to be part of the select elite again, an opportunity that truly materialises when he is hired by Underwood Samson, the firm that helps him cement his newfound rise on the social ladder. Although he often muses with marked acrimony and disparagement over his family’s waning prestige and influence in his native country, having become an influential member of Underwood Samson, he grows more self-confident and starts integrating into the American way of life. There are striking similarities between Changez and Gatsby in that both chase their American Dreams in much the same way: wealth and a beautiful woman. Both begin to play the social role that befits their new-found economic comfort. At this point, Changez is really pleased: “I was presumptuous enough to think that this was how my life was meant to be, that it had in some way been inevitable that I should end up rubbing shoulders with the truly wealthy in such exalted settings” (Hamid, 2007, p. 85). In such exalted settings, he derives his satisfaction from being with Erica, who “vouched” for his “worthiness”; as for those who doubt his credentials, he says, “my Princeton degree and Underwood Samson business card were invariably sufficient to earn me a respectful nod of approval” (Hamid, 2007, p. 85). Erica seems to give Changez the social life he desperately needs in America. Going to galleries “with clean lines and minimalist fixtures” and many other places ushers him into “an insider’s world—the chic heart of the city—to which” he

“would otherwise have had no access” (Hamid, 2007, p. 56). At this point, Changez seems to have carved for himself a niche in America; he seems to have found and embraced his American Dream embodied in *(Am)Erica*.

Hamid started writing his novel before the events of 9/11, and had already included many of the themes that came to form its core. The attacks, he admits, came to serve as a good backdrop to his novel, casting his manuscript in a significant historical moment, which helps consolidate the novel’s themes.

The attacks on the Twin Towers constitute a landmark in the history of the twenty-first century. Images broadcast by channels all over the world were so powerful they defied belief. The collapse of the Twin Towers had a special dimension because it was pregnant with symbolism and because it was the first dramatic event shared in real time with disbelief, fascination, horror or joy on all continents and in all countries. After the attacks, Muslims, be them living in Muslim countries or in the diaspora, fared badly, for they came to be wrongly associated with terrorism and all sorts of unfounded stereotypes and myths. The attacks bred suspicion towards everything Muslim, a phenomenon carefully represented in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. In the wake of the attacks, Changez begins to be aware of his distinctiveness, of his *Muslimness*, as it were, leading to an identity crisis, which eventually leads to his denunciation of America. Changez, in fact, goes through a period of psychological torment because his sense of his foreignness is heightened.

For her part, Erica is disconcerted by the attacks. Like every other American, she cannot help but be touched by the tragedy:

. . . she had been tense at the start of the evening, careworn and riddled with worry. Like so many others in the city after the attacks, she appeared deeply anxious. Yet her anxieties seemed only indirectly related to the prospect of dying at the hands of terrorists. The destruction of the World Trade Center had, as she had said, churned up old thoughts that had settled in the manner of sediment to the bottom of a pond; now the waters of her mind were murky with what previously had been ignored. I did not know if the same was true of me (Hamid, 2007, pp. 82-83).

The destruction of America’s economic symbol marks the beginning of an unexpected change in *(Am)Erica*’s relationship with Changez. Repressed thoughts that have allowed such unlikely bedfellows to cultivate a relationship of quasi-intimacy have begun to ooze out of Erica’s wounded pride. She naturally begins to sympathise with the families of the victims, trying in so doing to nurse *(Am)Erica*’s pride. Changez starts to accompany her to fundraisers and similar events held for the families of the victims, becoming, “in effect, her official escort at the events of New York society” (Hamid, 2007, p. 85). Accompanying her to such events represents his last-ditch attempt to salvage his relationship with *(Am)Erica*, and thus his potentially collapsing American Dream.

The spectacular attacks against New York and Washington are indeed against the heart of American capitalism and against the centre of the American political and military power. Yet, America—Changez believes—has capitalised on the tragedy to use it as a propaganda tool to wage the so-called war on terror. America and its allies reacted swiftly by invading Afghanistan and then Iraq, provoking by so doing mixed reactions in the Muslim world and the rest of the world alike. In the Muslim world, America’s megalomaniac military crackdown on what it viewed as radical Islamists was seen by many Muslims as an indirect attack on Islam, a new episode of the crusades. Likewise, many sceptics in the West believed

firmly that America and its allies were not chasing terrorists, but were instead after oil reserves.

The destruction of the World Trade Center compounds Erica's troubles in that she becomes more distant: a faint light fading into the horizon. Changez steps in to help her through her ordeal. This time he wants physical intimacy, something of which he has been deprived up till now. The scene that takes place in his flat captures the symbolic significance of their relationship. He is denied entry physically and symbolically:

She did not respond; she did not resist; she merely acceded as I undressed her. At times I would feel her hold onto me, or I would hear from her the faintest of gasps. Mainly she was silent and un-moving, but such was my desire that I overlooked the growing wound this inflicted on my pride and continued. I found it difficult to enter her; it was as though she was not aroused. She said nothing while I was inside her, but I could see her discomfort, and so I forced myself to stop (Hamid, 2007, pp. 89-90).

After this sad episode, Changez learns that Erica cannot be with anyone other than Chris. Her identity seems to be entwined with his. He is finally convinced that she has no place for him in her heart, for she and Chris had "an unusual love, with such a degree of commingling of identities that when Chris died, Erica felt she had lost herself" (Hamid, 2007, p. 91). The impossibility of being with Erica, whose allegorical association with America is inescapable, makes his American Dream impossible to realise.

9/11 displaces Changez from the ranks of the elite in New York. After the attacks, he becomes so self-conscious and fragile to the extent that his work productivity begins to dwindle. His fear of becoming the object of indiscriminate labelling turns into a quasi-neurosis with him. Jim is quick to see through Changez's inner conflicts; accordingly, he advises him to mend his ways lest he attracts more attention to himself. Nevertheless, Changez has already attracted attention to himself by deciding to grow a beard, a change in appearance that makes Jim think that he is looking shabby. In the hope to get Changez's productivity back on track, Jim offers him "a new project, valuing a book publisher in Valparasio, Chile" (Hamid, 2007, p. 137). Changez accepts.

In Chile, Changez continues his series of realisations, especially when he meets Juan-Bautista, who invites him over for lunch. By this time, Changez is going through an intense inner conflict, which has been compounded by looming international strife after 9/11. Juan-Bautista too can see through Changez, thus far still reluctant to intimate to his colleagues that he has been going through a severe identity crisis because of 9/11. Bautista asks Changez a question that alludes to the predatory nature of Underwood Samson: "Does it trouble you. . .to make your living by disrupting the lives of others?" (Hamid, 2007, p. 151) Like America, which conducts herself rather haughtily on the international scene, Underwood Samson undertakes a more or less similar mission by deciding the fate of people in different continents. Juan-Bautista likens Changez to a janissary, who slaves himself away for the American empire. The similarities that Bautista makes between Changez and the janissaries make Changez more aware of the conspiratorial support he gives to Underwood Samson and America. The historical allusion is significant because the janissaries were mainly Christian boys kidnapped at a young age by the Ottoman Empire. They were then groomed and taught the craft of war in order to become ferocious warriors and loyal defenders of the empire. Likewise, Changez is groomed at Princeton and taught to put the "fundamentals" (Hamid, 2007, p. 116) into practice at Underwood Samson. The novel is about Changez's slide into fundamentalism, "but in a neat reversal, it transpires that the real fundamentalism at issue

here is that of US capitalism” (Sharma, 2015) practised by Underwood Samson. The conversation with Bautista signals a turning-point in Changez’s decision to quit his job and go back home despite Jim’s imploration not to take a rash decision he may regret later. Changez feels “torn” because he “had thrown” his “lot with the men of Underwood Samson, with the officers of the Empire, when all along” he “was predisposed to feel compassion for those like Juan-bautista, whose lives the empire thought nothing of overturning for its own gain” (Hamid, 2007, p. 152). Despite Jim’s persuasions, Changez decides to leave the firm and go back home, more disillusioned than ever, his American Dream splintering in front of his eyes.

Hamid uses an unrequited love story framework to convey the loss that Changez feels after the attacks. He fuses the two love stories, so that the narrative assumes symbolic dimensions. In his interview with Hamish Hamilton, Hamid makes an interesting comment: “In the case of Changez, his political situation as a Pakistani immigrant fuels his love for Erica, and his abandonment by Erica fuels his political break with America” (Hamilton, 2007). Not only has Changez’s political/romantic break with *(Am)Erica* shattered his American Dream, but it has also opened his eyes to its elusiveness:

I wonder now, sir, whether I believed at all in the firmness of the foundations of the new life I was attempting to construct for myself in New York. Certainly I wanted to believe; at least I wanted not to disbelieve with such an intensity that I prevented myself as much as was possible from making the obvious connection between the crumbling of the world around me and the impending destruction of my personal American dream. The power of my blinders shocks me, looking back—so stark in retrospect were the portents of coming disaster in the news, on the streets, and in the state of the woman with whom I had become enamored (Hamid, 2007, p. 93).

### **LIVING A LIE: DISCONNECTED DREAMS IN *ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND***

Like Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Halaby portrays the loss that Muslim characters feel after the crisis of 9/11 by throwing them into the turmoil of a troubled love story. *Once in a Promised land* is about a Jordanian couple, whose lives are disrupted by the events of 9/11. Salwa, a Palestinian-Jordanian, was born in the United States, but raised in Jordan because her parents could not eke out a proper living in the United States. Although she grows up in Jordan, she often feels an attachment to America, an attachment that stems from a curse that keeps hounding her. Growing up with Hassan, who is infatuated with her, their relationship is expected to be crowned by marriage. Alas, when Jassim visits Jordan, his native country, to lecture on the importance of water, Salwa succumbs to the rosy prospects of going back to America, her birthplace. She jilts Hassan and marries Jassim to make her American Dream come true. While a seek-don’t-find formula applies to Hassan, the seek-find-lose formula structures Jassim’s and Salwa’s American Dream. Jilted by Salwa, Hassan gradually gets married to another woman after years of wistful nostalgia and self-pity. Much to Hassan’s dismay and disappointment, Salwa marries Jassim and secures a life in America. Salwa’s and Jassim’s tragedy unfolds in the wake of 9/11. The couple’s failure at reproduction—owing to Jassim’s reluctance—opens a Pandora’s box of problems. Salwa induces pregnancy without telling her husband, beginning thus a series of lies that drives them apart. Jassim, for his part, marries Salwa because her American citizenship will allow them to stay in America for as long as they wish. His childless marriage is almost loveless; Therefore, he and his wife are gradually led to have affairs with Penny and Jake respectively. Jassim hits and kills a boy on his way back home from his swimming routine. He becomes a

suspect, a conspirator, and is constantly hounded by the FBI. He only tells Salwa about the accident when it is too late, when their world has fallen apart.

Salwa's early fascination with America stems from her yearning to live a life of luxury. As a child, Salwa earns the nickname of "Miss Pajamas" (Halaby, 2007, p. 3) after her aunt brings her a pair of silk pyjamas from Thailand. Silk is a symbol of luxury and comfort; it makes Salwa feel like a "queen" (Halaby, 2007, p. 47).

In America, besides her bank job, she starts working as an estate agent, a job that promises a lot of money. She sometimes indulges in massive buying sprees, prompting Jassim to condemn these "extravagant lapses" (Halaby, 2007, p. 23). However, her quest for an ideal life in America turns out to be a mere lie because "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 Malboro man, and therefore impossible to find" (Halaby, 2007, p. 49).

We learn about Salwa's childhood in flashbacks. She and Hassan grow up together. Very few people doubt that they will one day part ways, except Hassan, who wakes up to Salwa's yearning for America the moment he sees how she reacts before and after Jassim has given his lecture. Jassim represents the opportunity for a better life that Salwa has been seeking. It is a matter of days before Jassim and Salwa decide to get married, a marriage whose promising prospects lie in the fact that "Salwa's American citizenship" will "enable them both to stay" (Halaby, 2007, p. 70) in America for good. Salwa breaks Hassan's heart, little knowing that America will eventually break hers, waking her up thus from her trance.

Hassam, who is much attached to home, meant home for Salwa before she was taken away from him. Growing up together, Hassan's presence and love gave Salwa a sense of stability and purpose. He would have never ventured outside Jordan to study in Romania had Salwa decided to stay. He would have "focused too much energy" (Halaby, 2007, p. 37) on her. Salwa is displaced twice: first from Palestine to Jordan, then from the latter to United States. In Jordan, she and her family find a safe refuge, and a sense of belonging that is severed physically, but never spiritually, from Palestine. Hassan, for Salwa, symbolises her lost motherland: she "was appreciative of Hassan's handsome face, sense of humor, and political activism, saw him as a symbol of Palestine" (Halaby, 2007, p. 240). Hassan on his own part was "smitten with Salwa, who in his eyes was the definition of perfection" (Halaby, 2007, p. 240). Siham is aware of the sense of belonging and rootedness, with which Hassan engulfs Salwa. She has always thought that Hassan "grounded" and "reminded" (Halaby, 2007, p. 240) her of who she is.

Nevertheless, Hassan has to contend with two forces, internal and external, which exert a powerful influence on Salwa. On the one hand, her father constantly reminds her that Hassan has no professional career yet, which makes him incapable of supporting a family. On the other hand, deep down, Salwa is torn between her love for Hassan and the yearning for a better life, perhaps the life that her parents could not secure in America when her father decided to take his family back to Jordan. Salwa likes Hassan, but "Beneath liking and the tiniest part of desire in which liking was wrapped, however, was her greed for a certain kind of life, and when she floated out those fantasies, Hassan was not part of them" (Halaby, 2007, p. 240). What Salwa is keenly seeking cannot be found with Hassan.

Halaby's main characters are caught up in a triangle of faltering love relationships, spanning almost a decade, and crossing two continents. Hassan for his part keeps grappling with his

loss of Salwa to Jassim. When the latter came back to Jordan to lecture on the importance of water, that day Hassan “knew Salwa would leave him” (Halaby, 2007, p. 37) because Jassim, “a stiff, well-to-do scientist. . .promised her America” (Halaby, 2007, p. 37). When Salwa realises that Jassim does not want a baby, and when their relationship worsens in the wake of 9/11, she begins to muse about what has gone wrong. she is occasionally gnawed by guilt for not marrying Hassan, for choosing America over Jordan. While Jassim’s and Salwa’s world is turned upside down, Hassan begins to recover from a nine-year reverie, during which he has been chasing his dream: “*Salwa, Salwa, Salwa. My hopes and dreams. My one first love. My perfect beauty. My purest Salwa*” (Halaby, 2007, p. 328). The moment he decides to call her to tell her about his marriage, he does not know that Salwa is “lying in an American hospital bed” (Halaby, 2007, p. 328), her American Dream shattered to pieces. Because he cannot reach her on the phone, he leaves her a message: “Intizar and I have gotten married. . .Salwa I am calling to say goodbye, to tell you that I wish you well. . .I am now going to try to forget you. . .God willing, you will be happy in your life” (Halaby, 2007, p. 328). Hassan moves on with his life, leaving Salwa and Jassim grappling with their imbalances in America. By American standards, Salwa and Jassim are highly successful, “a couple of upwardly mobile over-achievers living the American Dream” (Banita, 2010, p. 246). Both of them have embraced the American way of life in that “both have succumbed to the seductive lure of American Consumerism” (Motyl, 2011, p. 229). However, Salwa’s American Dream is incomplete because her husband, Jassim, does not want to have children. She is eventually tempted to induce pregnancy when she deliberately skips taking her contraceptives. She consequently becomes pregnant, yet, alas, miscarries to her dismay. Afraid of Jassim’s reaction, she only tells him of her miscarriage after their world has started falling apart. Jassim, on the other hand, knocks down a boy on his way back from his swimming pool routine. He becomes the object of growing suspicion because the accident coincides with the deep-seated distrust of Muslims, indiscriminately labelled as terrorists, in the wake of 9/11. He too refrains from telling his wife about the accident until it is too late. Salwa and Jassim become trapped in a vicious circle of lies, especially when they both start having affairs out of wedlock. Their American Dream splinters ultimately, and turns out to be a lie which mirrors the lie they have been living.

Uncertainty characterises Salwa’s life in America because Jassim is loath to have children. Jassim’s and Salwa’s failure to reproduce themselves in a country that has offered them success, however fleeting it may be, foreshadows their downfall towards the end of the novel. Being a hydrologist of a high calibre, Jassim strives to save rainwater, a priceless commodity, for future generations. “I’m afraid it is true”, he says, “water is my first love” (Halaby, 2007, p. 243). Jassim’s fascination with water stems from the fact that it has such a healing and invigorating power: “when you have been sick and you take your first sip of spring water after not eating for a day or two, is there anything tastier?” (Halaby, 2007, p. 243) Jassim’s success at saving a symbol of life and continuity is juxtaposed with his failure at reproduction. He fails to resuscitate, as it were, his faltering relationship with his wife, who desperately wants a baby, an equally powerful symbol of life and regeneration, making his and Salwa’s American Dream an unattainable ideal. It is failure at reproduction that causes a series of related problems. Salwa eventually convinces herself that skipping taking her birth-control pills a couple of days will not impregnate her: she “glided back to bed, lighter and more honest now. . .the Lie was deflated. Her emptiness has been filled” (Halaby, 2007, p. 11). She leads a troubled inward existence because “she had thought of nothing else and had not fought the evolutionary mandate to reproduce, just indulged it while she contoured her Lie” (Halaby, 2007, p. 11). Ironically, water, Jassim’s first love, cleanses Salwa’s lie about her miscarriage, but at the same time washes away their not-yet-born baby, their reason—at

least Salwa's—to try to salvage their American Dream: “That was another lie to the self, she realized. The distance grew from her Lie, the one that had spilled out from between her legs and been carried away by his precious water” (Halaby, 2007, p. 190).

Although Salwa's desire to have a baby is too strong, her husband's lack of empathy leads her to frustration. The feeling of being incomplete, of Jassim not being around to induce balance in her life causes her emotional pain. Jassim in fact finds that same balance in his morning ritual, which borders on a religious belief:

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 (Halaby, 2007, p. 3).

Swimming reinvigorates him, and renews his love for water. Nonetheless, he is too self-centred in that “His thoughts hovered over the internal elements of self and world rather than the external” (Halaby, 2007, p. 3). Salwa is undoubtedly part of that external world. Jassim fails to find, or rather to sustain, in his marital life the same balance he strives to create inwardly. Salwa, by contrast, believes that a baby will cement their relationship and make it more balanced. Although she has fulfilled her dream of living in America by marrying Jassim, she still feels that her life is empty:

Salwa's Lie covered a glorious underbelly. It was not *I didn't take my birth control pill* but instead a much more colorful *For a few years now I've felt that I've been missing something in my life. That's why I got a real estate license. It wasn't enough, though. I think having a child will fill that void. I am going to try to get pregnant, even though Jassim says he doesn't want a child* (Halaby, 2007, p. 10).

Salwa feels a thirst, a desire and an intense need to be recognized, to be gratified, to acquire the only thing that will fill that void. Material possessions and professional success, she eventually learns, provide fleeting gratification.

By a curious paradox, Salwa blames Jassim for what she herself seeks earnestly. Jassim's commitment to his successful career is paralleled by his attachment to his swimming routine, which, once disrupted after the accident, disrupts Jassim's life. After her miscarriage and lie to Jassim, Salwa spends a considerable amount of time brooding over her predicament, and blaming in the process Jassim for not being wholly open to the idea of having children. Nevertheless, she too, like Jassim, is strongly committed to a successful career, chasing lucrative opportunities whenever they present themselves. She immerses herself in work, and widens unconsciously the gulf between her and her husband. Jassim who believes that their relationship will improve after Salwa has become an estate agent is now at a loss as to why things “got worse” (Halaby, 2007, p. 23). After having secured her license as an estate agent, Salwa, often working on weekends, begins to devote a significant amount of her time to her clients. The result is that she is now “rushed to the point of destruction” (Halaby, 2007, p. 23). For Jassim, Salwa's business means that “the times they used to share together. . .now find Salwa busy, preoccupied, or gone”, and “with the exception of the mornings, Jassim found himself alone quite a bit” (Halaby, 2007, p. 23).

Salwa's and Jassim's deteriorating relationship, in reality, exposes the two polar facets of their American Dream: a seemingly balanced external reality, and a troubled inward existence. Jassim is a very successful hydrologist; he has secured for himself all the comforts of life: he lives in a beautiful house, drives an expensive car, and most importantly, he is held in high regard by his employer, Marcus, who sees him as an equal, not as a subordinate. When Salwa tells Jassim about the miscarriage, he starts going out with Penny, "who had done nothing more than to awaken a coiled desire in him" (Halaby, 2007, p. 158). He wants to be with her because perhaps he is "trying to hurt" Salwa for "lying about the miscarriage" (Halaby, 2007, p. 158). When he starts going out with Penny, Jassim becomes aware of the luxurious life he can afford, a life that many Americans cannot afford themselves:

When they entered the store, walking closer together than strangers, Jassim realized that in this place he would never have gone to on his own, an establishment with rolled-back prices and rolled-up hope, were all the people from all those neighborhoods. Only here he didn't need to peek in windows, to slow down and try to guess what was going on. Here, at Penny's side, he was welcome and could listen to comments (mostly grouchy, mostly focused on how expensive an item was) and phone conversations ("Hey, babe, I know, I want you too. I've got to pick up some light bulbs and brake fluid now. I'll call you later") as he watched large bodies bursting out of tight clothes, children stuffed into shopping carts, screamed at, slapped, and loved too loudly. The ways of the poor were new to him, and yes, he assumed that the people shopping in Wal-Mart were poor, all of them. Because why would anyone who could afford not to shop at WalMart come here? (Halaby, 2007, p. 276).

Penny ushers Jassim into a world hitherto unknown to him. The passage is significant in that it sheds light on the privileges that Jassim will lose when his American Dream crushes. On the other hand, Salwa leads a seemingly successful life because thus far she works two jobs, which enable her to send money back home to help her family. Notwithstanding all material success, America will soon become a barren land, with barren dreams.

From the outset, Halaby suggests that 9/11 has thrust Muslims into the limelight. They have become the object of public scrutiny and blind discrimination. Indiscriminate labelling, Halaby alludes, is dangerous because it associates Muslims with acts of terror perpetrated by few radicals who—albeit Muslim—do not represent all Muslims:

Our main characters are Salwa and Jassim. We really come to know them only after the World Trade Center buildings have been flattened by planes flown by Arabs, by Muslims. Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. Nothing and everything (Halaby, 2007, p. VII).

Apart from some occasional flashbacks, most of the novel is set in the post-9/11 tense atmosphere. After Salwa's miscarriage, Jassim accidentally knocks down a boy, who is skateboarding with his friends. The boy happens to be someone who plays exact-revenge-on-terrorists games with his peers, and who has openly expressed his hatred towards Arabs. By dint of this coincidence, Jassim becomes a suspect followed and harassed by the FBI. After the accident, Jassim begins to see his world falling apart because he "could not, at the moment, fully accept the idea that his lack of balance with Salwa had in some way tipped over and affected another's life. Taken another's life. It was too huge at the moment" (Halaby, 2007, p. 144). At work, his colleagues begin to regard him with suspicion following the investigation by the FBI agents. Added to his troubles, clients are now loath to deal with

him, a reluctance that eventually prompts Marcus to dismiss him, albeit convinced that Jassim did not knock the boy down on purpose. 9/11 serves as a wake-up call for Jassim, for it awakens him to his and Salwa's false American Dream:

In leaving out what was most on his mind, Jassim realized that they had spent their lives together not saying what mattered most, dancing around the peripheries instead of participating. He had seen in her a passion and excitement for life that had become dulled almost immediately upon their arrival in the United States. What he wanted in her could not exist in America. Could not exist with him, perhaps. And he feared that he could no longer exist in Jordan (Halaby, 2007, p. 303).

Indeed, what Salwa wants does not exist with Jassim. Nor does it exist in America. Jassim's lack of empathy and warmth drives Salwa into Jake's arms. Jake, who suffers from serious psychological disorders, toys with Salwa's feelings, giving her the impression that he is really infatuated with her. Once Salwa has fallen into the snares of his pretensions and succumbs to his whims, he talks behind her back, describing her as "an older woman" (Halaby, 2007, p. 318). When Salwa finally decides to go back to Jordan, she goes to Jake's flat to say goodbye. On her way, she sees three immigrant workers, Mexican she assumes, clipping branches off a tree. The scene close to Jake's flat captures Salwa's attitude towards her and Jassim's American Dream:

saw that all three workers were watching her. Just beyond her irritation, she imagined the miles of desert they must have crossed for the opportunity to trim and mow and prune, the perils they must have endured to have their clear shot at the American Dream. "It's all a lie!" she wanted to shout. "A huge lie." A lie her parents believed in enough that they had paved her future with the hope of glass slippers and fancy balls, not understanding that her beginning was not humble enough, nor was her heart pure enough, for her to be the princess in any of these stories. That she did not come from a culture of happy endings. That she would have been much better off munching on fava beans from her ceiling basket. She looked at those dark men looking at her and from a distance she could see their sacrifices, the partial loss of self that they too must have agreed to in coming to America, the signing over of the soul (Halaby, 2007, p. 316).

Jake loses his temper when Salwa tells him that she has finally decided to go back to Jordan to let the dust settle. He assaults her and causes her serious injuries, which could have been lethal had it not been for the immigrant workers, who helped her out and called the police on Jake. Meanwhile, Jassim was with Penny when his wife was lying unconscious, bathing in a pool of blood. With Penny, he "refused to think beyond this moment. He did not think he should stop because he might be *leading her on*," just like he has done with Salwa, "letting her believe something would be that would not be" (Halaby, 2007, p. 325). Jassim wakes up to a harsh reality only to find out that his dream has splintered.

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center, Salwa realises that her lie to her husband constitutes a small part of the big lie they have been living. She ultimately realises that "wishes don't come true for Arabs in America" (Halaby, 2007, p. 184), and most importantly she recognises that it is not "just her Lie that had brought distance between her and her husband and surrounded them with tension, it was the patriotic breathing of those around them. American flags waving, pale hands willing them to go home or agree" (Halaby, 2007, pp. 184-185). Jassim loses his job, his faith in his wife, who, in turn, loses her purity to Jake, and is now seriously battered, her attempt to go back to Jordan to sort things out nipped in the bud.

America gives false and illusive promises, a reality captured by Halaby's book cover. The latter depicts a swimmer, supposedly Jassim, swimming leisurely across azure water, whose clarity is tainted by the shadow of a plane hovering above him. The image on the book cover reflects the significance of the historical moment in which the novel was published in the sense that "it superbly capture[s] the ways in which the events of 9/11, suggested by the shadow of the looming airplane, haunt the lives the Arab characters, whose aspirations and ambitions are reflected through the cool brilliance of the water" (Vinson, 2006). The symbolic significance of the image on the book cover is enhanced by the biblical allusions of the novel's title, which refers to the "Israelites' exodus out of Egypt and to the promised land, . . . a cue to the novel's central theme of disillusionment of Arab-Americans in the US (C, 2015).

Halaby mingles a faltering marriage with a splintering American Dream to capture the chaotic, confusing reality, in which the Muslim characters find themselves in the wake of 9/11. Nonplussed by the changing political landscape in America, Salwa and Jassim, rather ironically, kill their dreams themselves. Salwa flushes down the toilet her not-yet-born baby, bringing about her eventual downfall. Her miscarriage symbolises "the depletion of Arab-American security and happiness on American soil" (C, 2015). By the same token, Jassim accidentally kills a boy and is eventually caught up in an intricate web of false accusations and unfounded stereotypes. Their lies to each other connect their individual tragedies; these lies in effect mirror the "Big Lie" (Halaby, 2007, p. 27)—the American Dream—they have been living.

## CONCLUSION

Mohsin Hamid and Laila Halaby structured the plots of their novels around faltering personal relationships to simultaneously depict the crumbling of their Muslim characters' world after the tragedy of 9/11. The eventual break that the main characters have with their loved ones happens in tandem with their break with America to signal the collapse of their American Dream. A seek-find-lose *langue* structures their personal as well as their political relationships. After 9/11, Changez's break with Erica and his abandonment of Underwood Samson signals his break with America and the end of his American Dream. By the same token, Salwa's and Jassim's personal problems are compounded by the changing politics of America in the wake of 9/11. The lies they tell each other expose the "Big Lie" they have been living. When their marriage crumbles, their American Dream comes to a dismal end. Jake assaults Salwa, and leaves her soaked in blood, nursing her injuries, physical and moral, unable to escape her American nightmare to Jordan. Jassim, still under investigation, loses his job and his friends, and is only left with the sad spectacle of a bloodied Salwa. Hamid and Halaby structure their plots around a seek-find-lose formula to emphasise the powerful appeal, the fleeting gratification, and more importantly the sheer elusiveness of their characters' American Dream.

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