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Research Article

From Promise to Paranoia: A Post-Colonial Critique of Immigrants' Narratives of the American Dream

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Abstract. Before 9/11, immigrants envisioned America as a land of opportunity, upward mobility, and personal freedom. The article contends that the American Dream, long romanticized as a reward for merit and hard work, is a fragile and exclusionary myth when subjected to racially fueled challenges. It argues that the 9/11 incident fundamentally disrupted the idealized notion of the American Dream for Muslim immigrants, as reflected in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* and H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*. However, employing Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonial concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and third space, alongside Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, it examines how the characters' identities become contested, fractured, and alienated in a post-9/11 context, as the then US government had passed several acts, including the Patriot Act (2001) and Homeland Security Act (2002). The sudden shift from inclusion to suspicion and from aspiration to alienation reveals a deep-rooted Orientalist gaze that constructs Muslim immigrants as the 'Other', dangerous, and incompatible with Western ideals. Through close textual analysis and comparative analysis, the research demonstrates how both

novels dismantle the illusion of a universal American Dream and expose its conditional accessibility. Last, the paper discusses the changing dynamics of the Incumbent Trump administration's policies towards Immigrants.

Keywords: Once in a Promised Land, Home Boy, 9/11, post-colonialism, Orientalism, Hybridity

INTRODUCTION

The research delves into the detailed character analysis of *Once in a Promised Land* and *Home Boy*. It sheds light on the perception of the characters about the American Dream before the 9/11 event and how they are being treated in the exotic culture while pursuing the American Dream. Moreover, the reflection of Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonial concepts like Hybridity and the third space in the novels mentioned above is highlighted in the following discussion. In the characterization of individuals in both books, they share the same vision, hold, and move with a widely held perception of the American Dream. Salwa, Jassim, Chuck, AC, and Jimbo strongly feel that America is the land of opportunity where success will come to those with the drive, determination, and hard work to achieve it. In the novels, this appeals to professional achievement, personal freedom, and a chance to build a better life for themselves and their families.

For Salwa and Jassim, the American Dream represents financial stability, professional success, and social acceptance. Salwa responds to her ex-friend, "Hassan, I am so happy for you that you have your dream."¹ She further says, "My dream is to be in America, married to a stiff Jordanian with a giant's name."² They consider America a place where one can successfully be who one wants and establish a good life. Their impression of America further becomes a source of fascination when they both find opportunities to work in their careers and enjoy the country's liberties.

Likewise, Chuck, AC, and Jimbo were captivated by ideas of success, liberty, and integration within America. Each considered New York City a melting pot from which one could join a diverse social fabric and live according to one's dreams. Their impressions of America thus most definitely rested upon the premise that it was truly emancipation from the past, carrying shackles to form new positive identities. The trauma of the post-9/11 experience fundamentally changes the dreams and ideals that the characters have. Salwa, Jassim, Chuck, AC, and Jimbo approach the American Dream with hopes of societal acceptance that their professional and personal ambitions are supposed to yield. However, such dreams went to tatters because of the 9/11 attacks. They are consumed with feelings of disillusionment and betrayal because of the societal racism and Orientalist stereotypes imposed upon them. Supporting the above stance, Franz Fanon rightly observes in *Black Skin, White Masks* that the colonial Subjects' mimicry of the Colonizer never fully assimilates them to the parent culture; therefore, they are not fully accepted in that society. As it is parallel to post 9/11 immigrants' narratives, such as *Home Boy* and *Once in a Promised Land*, where the characters embrace American values yet remain marked as exotic due to religion

¹ Laila Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 84.

² Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land*, 840.

and race. Hence, the article further digs into the analysis of the novels: the perennial hysteria and paranoia of the Muslim diaspora in the United States of America under the pretext of terrorist hunting.

Materials and methods

Textual analysis is critical in conducting this in-depth survey. Due to practical constraints, direct data collection from the field in the U.S. was not feasible; thus, the data have been sourced from secondary materials, including journal articles, printed books, e-books, and websites. To maintain a smooth flow of understanding, graphs and images have been intentionally excluded from the research.

This research takes a qualitative interpretive approach, applying literary and postcolonial theories to critically examine two contemporary novels: *Home Boy* by H. M. Naqvi and *Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby. They are chosen because of their significant representations of South Asian and Arab American immigrant culture within the United States in the years following September 11, 2001. Both plots deal with the above-mentioned conflicts and the nagging suspicion, exclusion, and cultural dislocation that escalated following the 2001 terrorist attacks.

Results

The analysis relies on postcolonial theoretical approaches such as Edward Said's Orientalism and Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity and "third space" concepts. These angles examine how the immigrant characters, caught between the two worlds, assert their identities within this empowering dysfunction. Contemporary scholars like Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg, whose works on trauma, memory, and American identity shed light on the context relevant to post 9/11 literature, are also incorporated.

The primary focus of this research is the identity crisis, racial profiling, paranoia, and the change of the American Dream. These issues are the primary focus during thematic analysis. Character arcs, plot contours, and metaphorical representation are analyzed to reveal the impacts of the 9/11 event on immigrants' lives psychologically and socially. Immigrants and constituents of different ethnicities have diverse histories that can be examined through the lens of fear and nationalism, utilizing a comparative approach.

Due to the interpretive approach taken, the study can understand how fiction portrays immigrant experiences and actively resists the mainstream narratives of belonging, loyalty, and national identity in post-September 11 America.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a plethora of literature available on the American Dream. However, I have specified the literature review of the research project on the post 9/11 event and how this incident changed the definition of the American dream. *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* by Richard Gray describes how the 9/11 event reshaped American culture, focusing on identity, trauma, and political critique. He critiques fiction that fails to go against the traditional narratives, like Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and John Updike's *Terrorist*, which do not fully engage with the new global cultural

context. On the other hand, he praises Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and Mohsin Hamid's *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, due to the thriving depiction of the post-9/11 imagery in terms of transnational and multicultural dimensions. After post 9/11 incident, the theater of terrorist hunting opened on many fronts, and there was so much hue and cry against terrorism. Therefore, Richard Grey argues, "If there was one thing writers agreed about in response to 9/11, it was the failure of language; the terrorist attacks made the tools of their trade seem absurd."³

Michael Rothberg replies to Richard Grey's argument that Richard Grey overly simplified the assessment of some magnificent works and overlooked them. He argues that many writers have skillfully crafted the themes of interconnectedness of global crises such as terrorism, international politics, and cultural exchange. Crises have always paved the way for creative responses and authors' rethinking to form narratives and structures to address new realities. This idea is also endorsed by Danyal Masood in his seminal article "The Challenges and Implications of Post-Concepts Historical Theory: Historiography of Meaning, Method and Manifestation". Michael Rothberg argues in his essay "A Failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the Post-9/11 Novel: A Response to Richard Gray":

In addition to Gray's model of critical multiculturalism, we need fiction about international relations and extraterritorial citizenship. If Gray's account tends toward the centripetal, an account of the world's movement toward America proposes a complementary centrifugal mapping that charts the outward movement of American power. The most challenging thing for citizens of the US empire to grasp is not the internal difference of their motley multiculturalism, but the prosthetic reach of that empire into other worlds.⁴

He further goes on:

His emphasis in "Open Doors, Closed Minds" stays resolutely on native ground, and he looks to those works primarily for their "centripetal" focus on rewriting the Southern novel. I suggest we pivot away from the homeland and seek a centrifugal literature of extraterritoriality.⁵

In *Who We Are? In The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Samuel P. Huntington points out that historically, the American Dream is deeply rooted in Anglo-Protestant values such as self-reliance, hard work, and meritocracy. He writes that the American dream faces numerous challenges: people migrating to America, especially Hispanic and Mexican immigrants, multiculturalism, transnationalism, biculturalism, and divided loyalties. He does not hesitate to say that the financial drain of immigrants and the nefarious effects of Globalization have badly affected the true American dream.

However, Miguel A. Centeno lambasted Samuel P. Huntington's approach towards the challenges of the American Dream in his book review, titled "Who Are You?". He says that, Samuel. P Huntington's approach is flawed and xenophobic. He

³ Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11* (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 9.

⁴ Gray, *After the Fall*, 3.

⁵ R. Gray, "Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis," *American Literary History* 21, no. 1 (August 19, 2008): 08, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajno61>.

points out that S.P. Huntington's proposition that America is inherently Anglo protestant is overly simplified. Miguel A. Centeno argues in a Journal article, "The real pity of this book is not just the potential political ills that might come from it or even the often-shoddy scholarship and argument. It is the sense of opportunity lost".⁶

Edward Said often critiques the element of the American Dream, which is American exceptionalism. He thinks that the narrative of the American dream always overlooks the historical context of the ongoing inequalities in the United States of America and the belligerent foreign policy impacts on the rest of the world. Edward Said's article "The Clash of Ignorance" replies to Samuel P. Huntington's thesis *Clash of Civilizations*. He argues that Samuel P. Huntington overly simplified the complex world order and stereotyped different civilizations. He writes that Samuel P. Huntington gives essential interpretations of Islam versus the West, ignoring the civilizations' history and context.

Noam Chomsky's seminal book *Requiem for the American Dream: The 10 Principles of Concentration of Wealth & Power* explains how the deliberate Strategies by the elite dismantled the American Dream. Therefore, Noam Chomsky identifies ten principles that describe the proper methodology of wealth and power concentration in a few hands. The following are the principles: the elite have worked to diminish the influence of the general population. Similarly, they shape such ideologies through media and educational systems that favor them. He categorically explains that the elite deliberately redesigns the economy, shifts the burden, attacks solidarity, runs the regulators, engineers elections, keeps the rabble in line, manufactures consent, and marginalizes the population. Noam Chomsky feels that there is a strong need for systematic change that upholds the true definition of the American Dream.⁷ The above-mentioned principles have also been discussed in the documentary film titled "Requiem for the American Dream with Noam Chomsky, DOCUMENTARY - Politics, Philosophical.

In "Terror and After..." Homi K Bhabha critically analyzes trauma and violence after 9/11. He highlights the profound impacts of the 9/11 attacks on cultural identity, ethical dimensions, and cultural identity. He censures the simplest binaries of good and evil, us and them, which emerge in a new form in the political discourse after September 11, 2001. To understand the trauma and violence, intellectuals need to resist the biased narrative and seek a deeper understanding of the repercussions of global terror activities. By doing so, the people must maintain a culture of hybridity and dialogue. He writes:

Confronting the politics of terror out of a sense of democratic solidarity rather than retaliation gives us some faint hope for the future. Hope that we can establish a

⁶ Miguel Centeno, "Who Are You?: Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity by Samuel P. Huntington Simon & Schuster, 2004, 428 Pages," Contexts (SAGE Publications, 2005), https://www.academia.edu/103382093/Who_are_you_Who_are_We_The_Challenges_to_Americas_National_Identity_by_Samuel_P_Huntington_Simon_and_Schuster_2004_428_Pages.

⁷ Noam Chomsky et al., *Requiem for the American Dream the 10 Principles of Concentration of Wealth & Power : Based on the Film Requiem for the American Dream* (New York Seven Stories Press Cop, 2017).

vision of a global society, informed by civil liberties and human rights, that carries the shared obligations and responsibilities of common, collaborative citizenship.⁸

The Journal article of Chahinez Ezzine "The Illusion of the American Dream in the Post 9/11 Era: A neo-Orientalist Reading of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*". analyzes the *Reluctant Fundamentalist* through the neo-colonialism lens. He says that Mohsin Hamid brings the deceptive facets of the American Dream. Oriental subjects have been dehumanized since the 9/11 incident. Islam has become the center of fear, and Muslims are associated with terrorism and treated as exotic, the other, despotic, and undemocratic.⁹ As mentioned by Brygida Gasztold in the journal article "Of Promises Delivered and Failed: Post -9/11 America through the Eyes of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid". Changez (protagonist) is fully assimilated into the American culture, while the 9/11 event compels him to reevaluate his identity position. The pursuit of the American Dream became difficult for Changez. His economic interest is vested in the US, and his subaltern position lies in Pakistan. Hafiza Sarwat Fatima and Dr. Ayesha Siddiqua in the research article "Americanness and the American Dream in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007)" argue that the American dream is an alternate name for equality, opportunity, and perseverance. They illustrate that the materialized nature of the American Dream can be traced back to classic works such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, while *Once in a Promised Land* is a story of a contemporary discovery of the Americans from the perspective of Arab Americans after 9/11.

According to Bounar Fateh and Serir Mortad Ilhem in the article "American Dream Revisited: The Personal and the Political in the *Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Once in a Promised Land*," Salwa and Jassim are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.¹⁰ Salwa marries Mr. Jassim Haddad and leaves Hassan (her first love) to pursue the American Dream. On the other hand, Jassim was born in America. Therefore, Salwa thinks that it will be an opportunity for him to marry Salwa. So, they married and lived happy lives in the US before 9/11. Things started happening in reverse in the aftermath of 9/11. In the same vein, Jassim gets tortured by perpetual personal tragedies and the investigation by the FBI. Salwa is not only emotionally tortured, but she also gets physical injuries and bruises from the ill-minded Jack, as Salwa goes to Jack (a character in the novel) to bid farewell to him.

Abeer Oday Ismael and Prof. Dr. Lamiaa Ahmed Rasheed illustrate in the journal article "Representation of Half-Arab Half-American: Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*" that Jassim and Salwa have a

⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, "Terror and After...", *Parallax* 8, no. 1 (January 2002): 3-4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1353464010119579>.

⁹ Chahinez Ezzine, "The Illusion of the American Dream in the Post 9/11 Era: A Neo-Orientalist Reading of Mohsin Hamid's the *Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007)," *اللغات والأداب* 18, no. 1 (June 30, 2023): 1-12, <https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/244524>.

¹⁰ Fateh Bounar, Mortad Serir, and Ilhem, "THE AMERICAN DREAM REVISITED: THE PERSONAL and the POLITICAL in the *RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST* and *ONCE in a PROMISED LAND*," *International Journal of Academic Research and Reflection* 5, no. 1 (2017), <https://www.idpublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Full-Paper-THE-AMERICAN-DREAM-REVISITED-THE-PERSONAL-AND-THE-POLITICAL-IN-THE-RELUCTANT-FUNDAMENTALIST.pdf>.

troubled relationship in the novel, which leads to breaking up their tied knot and washing their hands from businesses consequently. So, the writers conclude that living abroad in a diasporic culture without political representation causes resentment and identity crises.¹¹

Asma Noor describes in "Post 9/11 Identity Crisis in H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*" that after the 9/11 incident, not only did the geo-political infrastructure of the world undergo a drastic change, but it also affected the individuals living in the United States of America. She argues that a vivid example of it is Chuck and Ali Choudhry: characters in *The Home Boy*, labeled as "Terrorists" due to their religious and racial affiliation.¹² Dr Guven Fikret points out in the "Resistance Narratives: A Study of H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*" that *Home Boy* attacks Orientalism in Western discourse. He says that H.M. Naqvi tries to problematize and destabilize the concept of othering and stereotyping of the Orientals. It is a protest against American imperialism, its belligerent foreign policy, and the exploitation of third-world countries. It is the narrative of typical immigrants in which the protagonist comes to the US to pursue the American Dream. The protagonist wanted to suck out all the marrow of life, but his dream is shattered when the chapter of investigation is opened against him aftermath of 9/11. The article's writer concludes that *Home Boy* is a resistance narrative, proving that it is not religion, culture, or other ideologies that nourish extremism. It is the American policies that make extremists and give them the resort to violence.¹³

Marya Noor explains in the book chapter "Wall Street Sons: American Hospitality in H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*" that *The Home Boy* examines how the 9/11 tragedy is being used as a tool to justify Western colonialism and Imperialism by America. The author of the chapter argues that *Home Boy* depicts the imagery of the dichotomous representation of New York in the post 9/11 Era. Before 9/11, New York was relatively hospitable and welcoming. It would allow immigrants from across the world to assimilate into the aroma of the city.¹⁴ The text narrates, "After spending ten months in New York, you were a New Yorker, an original settler".¹⁵ The immigrants were allowed to thrive, prosper, and pursue the American Dream, regardless of their ethnicity, race, or religion. The sense of inclusivity, belonging, and hospitality were suddenly replaced by an inconvincible otherness, which deceived all notions that pre-9/11 America had destined

¹¹ Lamiaa Ahmed Rasheed, "Representation of Half-Arab Half-American: Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space in Laila Halaby's *Once in A...*," ResearchGate (unknown, September 25, 2023), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374166185_Representation_of_Half-Arab_Half-American_Homi_K_Bhabha.

¹² Mansoor, Asma. (2012). Post 9/11 Identity Crisis in H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*. *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies*. 4.

¹³ Fikret Güven, "Resistance Narratives," August 4, 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362482915_Resistance_Narratives.

¹⁴ Marya Noor, "Wall Street Sons: American Hospitality in H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*," Leeds Beckett University (Leeds Beckett University, 2022).

¹⁵ H M Naqvi, *Home Boy* (Crown, 2009), 115.

THEORETICAL LENS

Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonial theory.

'Hybridity' and the 'third space' are the concepts of the post-colonial theory of Homi K. Bhabha, which provides a unique framework to understand the complex nature of characters depicted in *Once in a Promised Land* and *Home Boy*. This theory helps to describe the fluid and dynamic identity formation in a post-colonial context before 9/11 in America. Hybridity is a concept that describes the creation of new identities after intermingling the colonizer and colonized cultures. It rejects fixed and rigid identities but rather accepts the fluid and dynamic nature of identities. It also discourages the binaries, suggesting that the formation of identities is a very complex phenomenon, and it is shaped by interactions with different identities and power dynamics. According to Homi K. Bhabha, 'Third Space' is a vacuum, where new cultural identities emerge through the encounter of different cultures, which resonate with the characters' experiences.¹⁶ In the coming discussion, the above-mentioned terms will be highlighted concerning the selected novels.

The characters in *Once in a Promised Land* navigate multiple cultural identities in the wake of 9/11. Salma and Jassim adapt mixed identities, negotiating between their American citizenship and Arab heritage. Neither were they fully assimilated nor wholly estranged from their cultural backgrounds. Similarly, in *Home Boy*, The Protagonist (Shahzad) is suspended between two worlds: Pakistani American culture and American society. His personality reflects a complex negotiation of Identity, influenced by both his experience in the United States and his ethnic roots.

In *Once in a Promised Land*, the characters find a 'Third space' where they negotiate their identities in post-9/11 America. So, the 'Third space' becomes a space of resistance against the traditional fixed identities, which allows the emergence of new hybrid identities. By the same token, in *Home Boy*, Shehzad's (protagonist) interaction with diverse communities in New York City shows that the novel explores 'Third space'. He navigates between the Pakistani enclave of Jackson Heights and the broader multicultural landscape of the city. Shahbaz occupies a liminal space; he neither completely assimilated into his own culture nor fully belongs to another culture.

Reflection of Edward Said's post-colonial Theory in *Once in a Promised Land* and *Home Boy*

Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism' and the 'other' presents a unique framework to analyze the representation of Arab and immigrant identities in *Once in a Promised Land* and *Home Boy*. These concepts manifest in the novels give a deeper understanding of post 9/11 America in which the diaspora and immigrants were treated as others, and individuals navigate for their identities within the dilemma of identity crises.

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Orientalism

Edward Said categorically explained the concept of Orientalism in three different aspects, all of them interdependent. In his view, the most accepted designation of Orientalism is Academic One. Therefore, He writes “anyone who teaches, writes about who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient- and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist- either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism”.¹⁷ Similarly, he explains the second perspective about Orientalism. “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident”.¹⁸ According to his point of view, the third aspect of Orientalism is gruesome, therefore, he writes “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”.¹⁹ The relationship between the Orient and Occident is the domination of power, which creates the hegemony of the West. In his words, “After all, Orientalism is a study based on the re-thinking of what had for centuries been believed to be an unbridgeable chasm separating East from West”.²⁰

So, in the Character analysis part of the paper, the lives of the diaspora inside America will be analyzed in light of the above-mentioned ideas about Orientalism.

Once in a Promised Land can be analyzed through an Orientalist perspective of how the Arab characters are portrayed in this novel after 9/11. Jassim and Salwa bear the brunt of the Orientalist stereotypes and stigmas. Likewise, Said’s theory of Orientalism helps to analyze how characters like Shahzad are the victims of stereotypes and prejudice due to their cultural backgrounds and the Western gaze upon the immigrant communities, particularly the Pakistani diaspora in post 9/11 America, is the main element of the novel *Home Boy*.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Pre-9/11 Context: Depiction of the American Dream in *Once in a Promised Land* and *Home Boy*: Character Analysis of *Once in a Promised Land* (Jassim Haddad and Salwa Hadad)

Education plays a pivotal role in the pursuit of the American Dream. Jasim Hadad wants to achieve upward mobility through education; therefore, he becomes a successful professional in water management resources. His professionalism is not only a milestone but also a significant contribution to society. The societal expectation is replicated in the following excerpt from *Once in a Promised Land*:

I’d like to introduce to you a very dear friend of mine, who is one of Jordan’s great minds, with so much to offer,” Nabeel began. “He has been temporarily wooed by the seductive swish of America’s broad hips, but he promises to return to us one

¹⁷ Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (Paris: Éditions Du Seuil, 2005).

¹⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 2005.

¹⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

²⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 355.

day soon to fix our water problems. Professor Jassim Haddad is a purist and has come to talk to us today about his first love: water.²¹

It reflects the belief that one can achieve the true American Dream through hard work. His success and professional understanding pave the way for financial security. His suburban home represents the stability of immigrants who wanted it when Salwa and Jassim came to the United States of America. It also symbolizes the attainment of social status within the American Society. Jassim's strong determination to his profession and integrity underpinned the traditional American norms like discipline and meritocracy. Jassim's settlement in America shows professional excellence and reinforces the notion of the American Dream, like economic and material well-being.

Salwa Haddad works in a bank and wants to excel in her profession, which is a stepping-stone for Salwa; therefore, her entrepreneurial aspiration gives her the firm belief that America is the place where dreams come true. Her character is marked by her ambition and career goals, which are integral to the American Dream. Salwa balances two distinct cultures: her Indigenous culture and her assimilation into American Culture. As Homi K. Bhabha also termed it Hybridity. As mentioned in the text of *Once in a Promised Land*, "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, tripped, and bought smaller and sexier pyjamas in the hope that she would one day wake up in that Promised Land".²²

Even though they were living comfortable lives before the 9/11 incident still they grapple with certain challenges while pursuing the American Dream. They face the challenge of identity crises; Jassim tries to ignore the surroundings and focus on his work. Salwa experienced immense emotional turmoil after her miscarriage, which led her to a further sense of loss and isolation. "Salwa had a miscarriage. Jassim's conscious and semiconscious thoughts were colliding, creating a heady, almost blinding panic".²³

Jassim and Salwa experienced a subtle amount of racial prejudice even before 9/11. It reflects the suspicion that American society is against immigrants. Jassim goes through some professional barriers and racism that resist his advancement in his profession. Similarly, Salwa struggles with prejudice at her job and in her daily life. The external environment presents a significant number of professional and social barriers. It indicates that the American Dream is not equally accessible to everyone.

Narrative Choices: Depiction of the characters' lives

Once in a Promised Land is written in a dual narrative structure, which swings like a pendulum between two characters: Jassim and Salwa. The setting of the novel in suburban Arizona is the symbol of the American Dream's material aspects. Jassim Haddad's home symbolizes the comfort and stability they have achieved in America. At the same time, the desert landscape of Arizona and its harsh environment show

²¹Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land*, 65.

²² Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land*, 49.

²³ Ibid., 117.

the challenges faced by the characters. It highlights the dual nature of the American Dream, which offers prosperity and often demands personal sacrifices. The key events in the novel illustrate the characters' aspirations and the obstacles they encounter. Jassim's involvement in the car accident and the subsequent investigation by the state authorities mark a significant shift in his perception of the American Dream. For Salwa, her affair and miscarriage represent the moments of crisis that force her to reevaluate the American Dream. Laila Halaby weaves the themes of disillusionment and resilience, which underscore the gap between the romanticized American Dream and the experiences of immigrants. Salwa and Jasim assimilated into the American culture and confronted their disillusionment with promises of success and prosperity. The unique portrayal underscores the intricate nature of the American Dream so that it can be a source of hope and a cause of disenchantment.

The American Dream and Homi K. Bhabha's Post-Colonial Theory: Application to Once in a Promised Land

In *Once in a Promised Land*, Jassim, a hydrologist, and Salwa, a banker, become entrepreneurs, struggling professionally and personally. Jasim and Salwa's personalities exemplify hybridity as they swim across the rivers of identities of their Jordanian heritage and American society. Salwa's father describes her identity as, "Salwa is Palestinian by blood, Jordanian by residence, and American by citizenship. That is why she uses so much water and has a taste for luxury. We tease her that she is first world. A colonizer. You see, she even studies money!"²⁴ Their identities reflect the amalgamation of multiple cultural influences and create complex hybrid identities. Jassim and Salwa start to mimic and assimilate into the American culture. It is vividly depicted in the novel, where the characters adopt American values and lifestyles while also trying to preserve their cultural values. Though they embraced professional success and material ease, and they got assimilation into American society, they still endured accepting the American culture which was convoluted by the discriminative behaviors after post 9/11.

The novel describes the very notion of the 'third space' as Jassim and Salwa persistently bargain their cultural identities and American values. The negations occur in their professional lives, interactions in society, and their relationship, creating a space where they can define themselves what to be as American while preserving their Jordanian roots. So, the third space allows them to create new hybrid identities.

H.M. Naqvi's novel *Home Boy* features characters Chuck (Shehzad) and his friends Jimbo (Jamshed) and AC (Ali Chaudhry), who are Pakistani immigrants navigating New York for the pursuit of the American Dream before the 9/11 attacks. The perception of the characters is a combination of aspiration, disillusionment, and the search for identity and belonging. The text narrates, "We would become Japs, Jews, Niggers. We were not before. We fancied ourselves boulevardiers, raconteurs, Renaissance people, AC, Jimbo, and me".²⁵ H.M. Naqvi offers a unique story of

²⁴ Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land*, 70.

²⁵ Naqvi, *Home Boy*, 1.

immigrants striving to step into a new and often unwelcoming society and pursuing the American Dream. The novel depicts the hopes, struggles, and resilience that define the immigrant's lives in America. It also provides a rich, thought-provoking depiction of the complexities of the American Dream. The characters experience many ups and downs in their lives to pursue the American Dream. However, when they were near to being settled in America, at that juncture, the 9/11 attacks did happen, thus the pursuit of the American Dream was shattered for them.

Chuck (Shahzad) is a recent graduate who has a firm belief in the meritocratic principles in America, where hard work can lead to upward mobility and economic well-being. His perception embodies the pursuit of the American Dream through excelling in the financial sector in New York City. Chuck initially believes that the US offers limitless opportunities for hard-working people. This is how Chuck dreams, "When I finally shook them off, I began imagining the shaman pulling himself out of bed to the call of the alarm, scratching his ass, shuffling to the bathroom, dreamily reading Liar's Poker before shaving and showering and heading out to pursue the American Dream".²⁶ Despite his ambition, Chuck was soon exposed to the ruthless realities of the job market. Chuck's cynicism grows as he reveals that success is not solely based on merit but is also driven by systemic barriers and biases. Soon, he realizes the perilous nature of the American Dream.

Jimbo (Jamshed) likes to preserve his own Pakistani culture and retains a strong connection to his Pakistani heritage. He always remembers the past in Pakistan and the society where he lived. So, he wants to pursue the American Dream in such a way as to preserve his own identity while adapting to an unfamiliar environment. Jimbo's big challenge is balancing life between his tradition and the complex nature of New York life. Jimbo experiences subtle prejudices that immigrants often face. His experiences show that societal barriers challenge the notion of equal opportunity, which is the main component of the American Dream. The above idea also resonated in the work of Woldeab, Yawson, and Woldeab (2021) that the 'melting pot' promise assimilation and integration, but persisting intimidation turns this promise into anxiety and paranoia.

AC (Ali Chaudhry): Hedonism and the Search for Identity

Ali Choudhary seeks the superficial meaning of the American dream. He indulges in the luxuries, pleasures, and excesses of city life. Seeking immediate pleasure and enjoyment and focusing more on materialism and physical pleasure. "I am going to light an American Spirit, put my legs up on this couch, and scratch my groin with, ah, bestial abandon. The pursuit of happiness is my constitutional right. I'm going to exercise right now. *Ki Samjha chetay?*"²⁷ Despite all these activities and his outward confidence, he struggles with insecurities while securing a place in America. His hedonistic approach towards his life is an indication of coping with feelings of inadequacy and displacement. AC faces psychological problems while pursuing the American Dream.

²⁶ Naqvi, *Home Boy*, 87.

²⁷ Naqvi, *Home Boy*, 101.

Homi K. Bhabha's Post-Colonial Theory and Home Boy: Hybridity and Mimicry in Chuck, Jimbo, and AC's identities:

In *Home Boy* Chuck, Jimbo and AC adapt to the American culture as they try to assimilate their Pakistani culture with the American culture. Moreover, their identities are shaped by their experiences as immigrants in America, where they find a way to live between two cultures. The mixture of American slang language like “Fo shizzle, ma nizzle”²⁸ translated as sure my friend and using Urdu words “Duffa ho!”²⁹ (stay away) signifies the mixture and hybridity of Pakistani and American culture. H.M. Naqvi's characters start imitating American slang, dress, and social customs while upholding their connections to Pakistan's cultural values. Even Shahzad called himself Chuk to blend his identity with English people's names. This mimicry is a strategy for fitting themselves into the alien culture.

In-Home Boy is the third space where Pakistani culture intersects with American aspirations. As Naqvi describes it, “Mohammed Shah or the Shaman was dark, lanky, over the hill, and could be described as a drifter, a grifter, an American success story, a Pakistani Gatsby.”³⁰ This space allows the characters to blend the two cultures and negotiate their identities. It is a site for cultural innovation and transformation, where identities are made, and traditional boundaries are challenged. Through the character's experiences, it is redefined how to be both Pakistani and American, demonstrating the fluid and hybrid nature of cultural identity in a globalized world.

Post-9/11 Context: The American Dream in *Once in a Promised Land* and *Home Boy*, and Edward Said's Orientalism relevance:

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism offers a critical framework through which one can examine the prejudices faced by the characters in both *Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby and *Home Boy* by H.M. Naqvi. To Said, Orientalism is the lens through which the West perceives or views the East as essentially an Other, backward, and threatening. The characters in both novels fall back on such Orientalist stereotypes, like asking about religion. As in *Once in a Promised Land*, the sudden onslaught of racism and xenophobia due to the 9/11 attacks engulfs the lives of Salwa and Jassim. FBI official investigates “How often do you pray in a mosque?”³¹ The narrator describes it as follows: “They are looking at the fact that you are an Arab.”³² Salwa's miscarriage and Jassim's getting into a car accident are threshold moments, indeed symbolizing the real personal and professional losses they suffer as they become objects of suspicion in society. Similarly, in *Home Boy*, Chuck, AC, and Jimbo experience that they are exposed to racial profiling, detention, and a drastic change in the perception of the public, which drastically changes their self-perception and interaction with society during the period.

²⁸ Ibid., 171.

²⁹ Ibid., 186.

³⁰ Naqvi, *Home Boy*, 21.

³¹ Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land*, 231.

³² Ibid., 301.

Kulvinder Arora explains that diasporic literature once painted assimilation as the promise of success, but later the same literature exposed it as fraught with tension and exclusion. So, this hopeful integration to persistent alienation echoes the notion of promise to paranoia in the immigrants' experiences in the American Dream.

Salwa, the Jordanian immigrant in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, comes to America with her husband, Jasim, dreaming of professional success and personal happiness. She believes in America as the land of opportunities where hard work and strength will help achieve financial stability and progress one's career. The events of 9/11 changed all things for Salwa. As a woman from the Middle East, she faces greater scrutiny and suspicion. When a woman asked her in the bank, "What do you mean that you are Palestinian from Jordan?" Does it mean you will steal my money and blow up my world?".³³ The novel describes incidents of racial profiling and discrimination that Salwa goes through, prohibiting the change in public perception of radicals towards her community. To that effect, one can trace a shift from hope to fear and disillusionment when trying to underline the idea that the American Dream for immigrants cannot stay as fragile in a post-9/11 context. "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". And says, "It's all a lie!" she wanted to shout. "A huge lie".³⁴

To Jassim, the successful hydrologist, America witnessed a country that would allow its professional success to bloom. As a diligent worker, Jassim believes America will let him be successful based on merit and expertise alone. Following 9/11, numerous problems surrounded Jassim both professionally and personally. Colleagues and clients begin to view him with suspicion due to his Middle Eastern background. "Al, the FBI is trying to get information on every Arab in the country right now. Our government is at a loss, so they are grasping at straws. Jassim is a straw".³⁵ There is racial profiling and public hostility, affecting his sense of belonging and destabilizing his professionalism. Allegation of Water pollution drags him to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), "The agents asked more questions, each more farfetched than the previous one. Did you ever meet any of the hijackers personally?".³⁶ He slowly begins to lose his confidence in his professional and personal life. Halaby chooses to reflect in Jassim's character the universal experience of immigrants whose dreams get defrauded by a society increasingly driven by panic and suspicion.

Chuck, a Pakistani immigrant in H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*, comes to America with illusions of prosperity, liberty, and identity and is lured by the dynamic life in New York City. After 9/11, Chuck's life is turned upside down. He faces racial profiling, detention, and a complete change in the political atmosphere in society. These experiences have been documented in a thrilling narrative to portray the paranoia and racism set off by the attacks. The event of Chuck's arrest and FBI investigation

³³ Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land*, 113.

³⁴ Ibid., 316.

³⁵ Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land*, 269.

³⁶ Ibid., 232.

represents the generalized suspicion against Muslim immigrants. The following dialogue shows the nature of the investigation:

Grizzly: You a terrorist?

Chuck: No, sir.

Grizzly: You a Moslem?

Chuck: Yes, sir.

Grizzly: So, you read the Ko-Ran?

Chuck: I've read it.³⁷

It comes quite contrary to his earlier fascination with dreams, and he finds himself in a situation where his identity becomes his weakness. Chuck's dreams and aspirations changed after 9/11. Chuck's experience exemplifies how quickly the American Dream can slip from the fingers of a society that had already racially and religiously set boundaries that most people would never be able to cross.

AC, like Reza - another immigrant from Pakistan, also shows similar sentiments about his dreams and the freedom he wants to achieve in America. 9/11 deeply impacts AC's life as he experiences racial profiling, detention, and a basic change in people's attitudes toward him. These experiences are elaborated in the novel to show just how societal bias crept in after 9/11. From the changing experience of AC, one sees how society shifted towards alienating Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants and a change in their sense of security and feeling of belonging in that land.

Like his friends Chuck and AC, Jimbo is a Pakistani immigrant who has also migrated to the United States in pursuit of the American Dream: success, freedom, and a feeling of belongingness in America. Jimbo's post-9/11 experiences reflect racial profiling and detention, coupled with an overall change in public perception. The underlying message explores the personal and social effects of the attacks on his life. His detention and hostility were symptoms of this change in society's view of Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants as threats to the security of America. 9/11 radically changes Jimbo's dreams and aspirations. His hope and idealism are substituted by increasing disillusionment, and he feels betrayed. French immigrants face the same biases that South Asian immigrants faced. Ghaderi argues that francophone immigrant writers critique the changing notion of the American dream from promise to underlying tensions and insecurities experienced by immigrants.

Change in Personal Goals and Ambition

The trauma of the post-9/11 experience fundamentally changes the dreams and ideals that the characters have. Optimistically, Salwa, Jassim, Chuck, AC, and Jimbo approach the American Dream with hopes of societal acceptance, and their professional and personal ambitions are supposed to yield. However, such dreams went to tatters because of the 9/11 attacks. They are consumed with feelings of disillusionment and betrayal because of the societal racism and Orientalist stereotypes imposed upon them.

³⁷ Naqvi, *Home Boy*, 113.

The case of Salwa, the immigrant who is optimistic and then turns out to be jaded, echoes loudly how 9/11 changed Middle Eastern immigrants. The miscarriage, on a more personal note, signaled a tinge of bereavement and serves as a metaphor for the collapse of her American Dream. Once proud and respectable, Jassim must now stand in social isolation and professional decline, which underlines how vulnerable his aspirations were in a society that has been finally brought under the reign of fear and mistrust.

The goals of Chuck, AC, and Jimbo in *Home Boy* also change drastically. Nothing defines Chuck's erosion of his belief in the American Dream better than his arrest and interrogation. These characters' initial hope and enthusiasm regarding their prospects in America are replaced by a deep sense of alienation and disaffection. The shift from optimism to disillusionment shows how hard the blow of societal prejudice and the visions of Orientalism can be on the American Dream at an individual level. Adding to the above discussion, Leigh Patel opines in an essay that nationalist narratives like 'melting pot' and 'American Tapestry' are not benign myths but erase the history of indigenous and black dispossession. In this way, such narratives transform the immigrants' dream into paranoia.

Comparative Analysis of the Selected Novels

The similarities and differences in reconstructions of the American Dream have been shown to exist through the comparisons of characters' experiences and changes in *Once in a Promised Land* and *Home Boy*. Both novels have a trajectory moving from hope to disillusionment, catalyzed by experiences with Orientalist stereotypes and prejudice within society.

In *Once in a Promised Land*, Salwa and Jassim show the fragility of their dreams through personal and professional crises. Salwa's miscarriage and Jassim's car accident represent critical turns that point to their increasing isolation and problems.

In *Home Boy*, the situations of Chuck, AC, and Jimbo underline how racial profiling and suspicion in society aggravate their cost of living. Chuck being arrested and adequately scrutinized stands to symbolize the more comprehensive fears and prejudices hurled at the Muslim immigrants. Though the specifics of their journeys differ, the general narrative common to both novels is one of the transformations from optimism to disillusionment as sculpted by the post-9/11 social context.

The incumbent Trump Administration's immigration Policies

The Trump administration's immigration policies marked a seismic shift from the long-standing American narrative of inclusivity, instead articulating an agenda rooted in restrictionism, securitization, and ethno-nationalist populism. These policies were not just administrative decisions but a profound departure that racialized immigration and redefined national belonging through the lens of exclusion and symbolic power.

At the core of this approach was the calculated use of immigration as a political tool within an authoritarian populist framework. Mustafa Sagir and Stephen T. Mockabee argue that the Trump administration strategically employed a nativist and populist rhetoric that portrayed immigrants, especially Muslims and Latinx

individuals, as existential threats to the American state.³⁸ This strategy effectively garnered electoral support by tapping into white anxieties about demographic change, aligning immigration restriction with the preservation of American cultural identity.

Symbolic politics played a central role in shaping public perception and policy direction. The construction of the border wall, the Muslim Ban (Executive Order 13769), and the family separation policy at the U.S.–Mexico border were not only acts of enforcement but also powerful messages to the public about who belongs in the American polity. Beer emphasizes that these acts operated as symbolic performances of sovereignty designed to reinforce the national imagination's visibility of state power and racial boundaries.³⁹

The administration not only implemented but also entrenched systemic barriers to immigration. In its first year alone, it executed nearly 400 executive actions to curtail legal and unauthorized immigration.⁴⁰ These actions, including the revocation of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the drastic reduction of refugee admissions, and the redefinition of public charge rules to dissuade low-income immigrants, were geared towards physical and psychological deterrence, effectively criminalizing migration itself.⁴¹

Perhaps the most controversial of these was the "zero-tolerance" policy, which led to the separation of thousands of migrant families at the southern border. The support for this policy was significantly correlated with racial resentment and authoritarian tendencies among specific segments of the American public. Rather than functioning as neutral law enforcement, these actions were deeply racialized interventions that reshaped the sociopolitical landscape.⁴²

King and Riddlesperger further argue that immigration under Trump became racialized not only in practice but in perception, with Latino and Muslim immigrants disproportionately framed as criminal and deviant.⁴³ This aligns with the logic of what Bhabha might call the immigrant's "unhomely" condition: perpetually visible yet never fully belonging. The cumulative effect was a redefinition of citizenship along racial, religious, and nationalistic lines.

In sum, the Trump administration's immigration policies were more than administrative maneuvers; they were performative acts of exclusion that restructured

³⁸ Mustafa Sagir and Stephen T. Mockabee, "Public Attitudes toward Immigration: Was There a Trump Effect?," *American Politics Research* 51, no. 3 (November 22, 2022): 1532673X2211397, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X221139762>.

³⁹ Daniel J. Beers, "The End of Resettlement? U.S. Refugee Policy in the Age of Trump," *Social Sciences* 9, no. 8 (July 24, 2020): 129, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9080129>.

⁴⁰ Sarah Pierce, Jessica Bolter, and Andrew Selee, "U.S. Immigration Policy under Trump: Deep Changes and Lasting Impacts," July 2018, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/TCMTrumpSpring2018-FINAL.pdf>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Raul Hinojosa Ojeda and Edward Telles, "Trump Paradox: How Immigration and Trade Affected White Voting and Attitudes," *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 7 (January 2021): 237802312110019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211001970>.

⁴³ James D. King and James W. Riddlesperger, "The Trump Transition: Beginning a Distinctive Presidency," *Social Science Quarterly* 99, no. 5 (September 28, 2018): 1821–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12537>.

institutional norms and public consciousness. By intertwining immigration with racial politics, symbolic gestures, and populist ideology, the administration fundamentally altered the terrain of American immigration discourse and deepened the precarity of racialized immigrant communities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Both novels have different plots but share the same story: pursuing the American Dream. The novels are narrated in such a way that they depict the experiences of immigrants in America. Before the September attacks, the immigrants were facing different types of challenges, like identity, jobs, and cultural biases. Before 9/11, the situation for immigrants, especially Muslims, was not bleak, but after the attacks, the environment suddenly changed to terror and fear. Muslim immigrants are often marked as exotic and terrorists. As Erika Lee demonstrates in *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States*, xenophobia is the immortal element of American History, from Benjamin Franklin's suspicion of German immigrants to contemporary racialized political slogans, persistently used by demagogues to picture 'other' as threatening. In a nutshell, *Once in a Promised Land* and *Home Boy* are the immigrants' narratives, which tell the stories of the immigrants pursuing the American Dream and the post 9/11 impacts on their lives. It is true that the 9/11 event brought a shift in the then US government's domestic and foreign policy, which consequently turned the US into a tribulation for the Muslim diaspora. One can conclude that the author depicted the characters in such a way that completely reinforces the very idea of Orientalism, which Edward Said coined in 1978. Subsequent research should examine how different immigrant groups view the American Dream in the post-9/11 era. It should focus on the differences in their experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and identity negotiation. Long-term studies would reveal how perceptions of the Dream change over generations and in response to socio-political shifts. It is essential to use intersectional approaches that consider how race, religion, gender, and class contribute to immigrant anxieties and hopes. Additionally, analyzing media, literature, and film can show how cultural narratives either reinforce or challenge post-9/11 fears. Finally, comparative and policy research can provide a useful framework for promoting social integration and addressing structural inequalities in the immigrant experience.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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