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**Women's Empowerment in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007)**

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This work is lovingly dedicated to all those who have supported and inspired me throughout this journey.

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores the complex experience of Arab-American identity and gender roles through the analysis of *Laila Halaby's* novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). Focusing on the main character, **Salwa Haddad**, the study investigates how diasporic Arab women negotiate cultural displacement and patriarchal structures in a post-9/11 American context. Drawing on **Homi Bhabha's** theory of hybridity and Third Space (1994), **Edward Said's** *Orientalism* (1978), and **Judith Butler's** theory of gender performativity (1990), this research examines how Salwa, as a diasporic woman, becomes both a subject of cultural fragmentation and an agent of transformation. While she struggles with her uprootedness and marginalization, Salwa actively engages in a process of identity reconstruction—one that challenges stereotypical Western representations and resists patriarchal expectations within her own heritage. The novel portrays her as a mediator between two cultures, who gradually redefines her place through negotiation, resistance, and self-assertion. By highlighting Salwa's shift from vulnerability to empowerment, this study demonstrates how diasporic Arab-American women can reframe trauma into agency and marginality into strength.

**Keywords** : Arab-American Women, Diaspora, Displacement, Hybridity, Gender Performativity, Orientalism, Empowerment, Post-9/11 Fiction.

## **I-General introduction**

Arab American literature began in the U.S. in the 1920s, led by pioneers like Gibran Khalil Gibran, whose *The Prophet* remains widely influential, and Ameen Rihani, who wrote the first Arab-American novel, *The Book of Khalid*, laying the foundation for a growing and evolving literary tradition, Arab American literature has become a rich area of academic exploration, particularly in the wake of the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The post-9/11 landscape has deeply influenced the way Arab American writers, especially women, engage with issues of identity, cultural alienation, and the psychological toll of displacement. Laila Halaby's literary works, including her novel *Once in a Promised Land*, address these themes in profound ways, offering insight into the existential crises faced by Arab immigrants, particularly Arab American women, navigating the complexities of belonging in post-9/11 America.

Halaby's work delves into the transformation of Arab American identity under the intense scrutiny of societal and media-driven stereotypes, offering a critique of the portrayal of Arab Americans as "other." Through the lens of her protagonist, Salwa, Halaby examines the ways in which the aftermath of 9/11 impacts both the personal and professional lives of Arab immigrants. The novel confronts not only issues of racism and social discrimination but also explores the broader implications of these issues for Arab American women's identities and experiences. For instance, Halaby contrasts Salwa's longing for belonging with her increasing invisibility, revealing how assimilation becomes both a necessity and a burden. Moreover, the couple's fractured relationship mirrors the larger disintegration of identity experienced by immigrants caught between cultures. Through such personal narratives, Halaby transforms the political into the intimate, exposing how public prejudice shapes private suffering.

In this context, Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* offers a unique and personal exploration of the displacement, hybridity, and identity transformation of Arab women in the U.S. By examining the journey of Salwa and her experiences in post-9/11 America, the novel encapsulates the struggle of Arab Americans to negotiate their identities amidst growing xenophobia and the challenges of assimilating into a society that often views them with suspicion. Additionally, when compared to other works like Mohja Kahf's *The Girl with the Tangerine Scarf*, Halaby's narrative stands out for its transcultural feminist approach, which emphasizes the intersection of gender, migration, and the negotiation of identity. While Kahf's writing addresses the broader spectrum of Muslim identities, Halaby's work focuses specifically on the experience of Arab American women navigating their roles in a complex cultural and political environment.

Laila Halaby, born in Beirut to a Jordanian father and an American mother, represents the new generation of Arab American writers whose works are increasingly being recognized for their contributions to discussions about identity, displacement, and belonging. In *Once in a Promised Land*, she portrays the lived realities of Arab American women as they attempt to reconcile their cultural heritage with the demands of their new American life. The novel explores the transition from their native lands to the deserts of Arizona, a symbolic representation of both physical and cultural dislocation, as they chase their dreams of opportunity and freedom in America. Through this juxtaposition, Halaby employs a postcolonial lens to expose the illusion of the American Dream, revealing how aspirations for belonging are undermined by systemic exclusion and racialized otherness.

## **1-Literature Review**

The critical discourse surrounding Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* is deeply rooted in the broader context of Arab American literature following the traumatic events of

September 11, 2001. Scholars such as Evelyn Alsultany, Nadine Naber, and Steven Salaita have discussed how the attacks forced Arab Americans, previously considered invisible, into a realm of “hypervisibility.” These scholars build upon Edward Said’s seminal work, *Orientalism*, exploring how the cultural and political landscape of post-9/11 America shifted the narrative surrounding Arab Americans.

In *Moral Crusades: Race, Risk and Walt Whitman’s Afterlives* (2012), Georgiana Banita argues that Halaby’s depiction of post-9/11 Arab Americans as “social outsiders” reflects how they are categorized as both second-class citizens and perceived risks to national security. Amanda Lloyd, in her 2012 thesis *Reverse Orientalism: Laila Halaby’s Once in a Promised Land*, contends that Halaby inverts the Western gaze by representing an America that is conspiratorial and rife with religious zealotry, thus offering a critical reflection on how Arab Americans view themselves in this environment.

Mudasir Altaf Bhat’s *Broken Promises in a Promised Land: Race and Citizenship after 9/11* (2014) further delves into the psychological effects of the political climate on Halaby’s protagonists, suggesting that the events of 9/11 force Salwa to question her place in the U.S. and the nature of her existence within this increasingly hostile society.

## **2-Issues and Working Hypothesis**

Building upon these critical perspectives, this research will explore how Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land* provides a window into the complex identities of Arab American women immigrants. Central to this investigation is the question: How do these women perceive their identities in the context of their dual existence as both Arabs and Americans? Using Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity as a framework, this study will explore how these

women negotiate their cultural identities between two worlds—one defined by their Arab heritage, the other by the demands of American society.

While many scholars have focused on post-9/11 themes such as displacement, loss of identity, and racialization, this research aims to shed light on the specific experience of Arab American women as they navigate these issues. This study will take a multidisciplinary approach, utilizing sociological, political, and psychological methodologies to better understand how the female characters in Halaby's novel confront societal expectations, gender roles, and the ongoing quest for empowerment in an increasingly alienating world.

By employing postcolonial theory, particularly through the lenses of displacement and hybridity, this research will offer new insights into the diasporic experience and the psychological challenges of assimilation and identity negotiation faced by Arab American women. Additionally, gender roles and empowerment within the novel will be examined to explore how these women resist, adapt, or assimilate within the confines of a society that often marginalizes them.

### **3-Methodological Outline**

This research will be divided into four main sections:

1. **Introduction:** An overview of the topic, theoretical framework, and research objectives.
2. **Methods and Materials:** A detailed explanation of the methodologies used, including postcolonial theory by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Judith Butler in relation to the analysis of Halaby's novel.

3. **Results:** Presentation of the key findings based on the analysis of the protagonists' experiences in the novel, focusing on identity transformation and the psychological impact of immigration.

4. **Discussion and Analysis:** A thorough discussion of the findings, divided into two chapters:

- **chapter 1:** negotiating identity: displacement and cultural alienation in once in a promised land"
- **chapter 2:** the assimilation of women's empowerment and gender roles in laila halaby's once in a promised land (2007)

The dissertation will conclude with a general conclusion, summarizing the findings and suggesting new avenues for further research.

## **II-Methods and Materials**

Postcolonial theory, which emerged prominently in the late twentieth century, serves as a critical response to the enduring impacts of European colonialism across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Although its formal articulation gained momentum during the 1970s and 1980s, the field remains dynamic and continues to evolve to address contemporary realities (Young, 2001). Postcolonial scholars assert that colonialism's legacy persists not only through political and economic structures but also through cultural mechanisms, profoundly shaping identities, languages, and systems of power.

### **1-Methods**

A foundational figure in postcolonial studies is Edward Said, whose seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) introduced the concept of the "Orient" as a Western ideological construction. According to Said (1978), the West portrayed the East as exotic, backward, and fundamentally inferior, thereby defining itself as rational, superior, and civilized. This process, he argued, was instrumental in justifying colonial domination. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said further illustrated how imperial narratives subtly permeate Western literature and culture, even after the formal end of colonial rule (Said, 1993). In this dissertation, Said's notion of Orientalism is employed to analyze the ways Arab-American identities are constructed and perceived in the post-9/11 American context.

Expanding upon Said's contributions, Homi K. Bhabha introduced critical concepts such as hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence, and the Third Space, which illustrate the intricate negotiations between colonized and colonizer cultures. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha (1994) describes hybridity as the formation of new cultural identities that arise from

the interactions of colonial power and resistance, destabilizing fixed notions of cultural superiority. The "Third Space," a term coined by Bhabha, refers to an in-between space where cultural meaning and negotiation take place, challenging rigid binaries like colonizer/colonized and self/other (Bhabha, 1994). In the context of this study, Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the Third Space are critical for understanding the shifting identities of Arab-American immigrants navigating multiple cultural affiliations.

At the intersection of postcolonial and gender theory stands Judith Butler, whose groundbreaking text *Gender Trouble* (1990) revolutionized the understanding of gender identity. Butler (1990) introduced the concept of gender performativity, contending that gender is not a stable or innate identity but rather a repeated performance shaped by social expectations and norms. Gender, according to Butler, is constituted through reiterated acts that create the illusion of a coherent and consistent identity. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant for examining how Arab-American female characters, such as those in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, negotiate complex gendered expectations stemming both from their Arab cultural heritage and the dominant American society.

Thus, the present dissertation draws upon three primary theoretical frameworks: Said's Orientalism, Bhabha's hybridity and Third Space, and Butler's gender performativity. Together, these concepts provide a robust analytical foundation for exploring key themes such as displacement, identity negotiation, cultural assimilation, intersectionality, and empowerment within Arab-American diasporic narratives. By employing this interdisciplinary approach, the study aims to reveal how identity is continuously reconstructed in response to cultural encounters, systemic racism, and gendered experiences in a postcolonial, post-9/11 American landscape.

## **2-Material**

### **2.1 Butler's Theory**

Judith Butler's theory of performativity is fundamental to understanding identity construction in diasporic communities. In her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that identity, including gender and cultural identity, is not an innate, fixed entity but rather a repeated performance based on social norms and expectations (Butler, 1990). Identity becomes a dynamic process where individuals continuously "perform" or "enact" certain behaviors, gestures, and expressions to align themselves within a particular cultural or social context. This performative view is crucial when analyzing the identity struggles of Arab-American characters in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, as they navigate multiple, often conflicting, cultural frameworks.

Furthermore, Butler introduces the idea of subjectivity being shaped by external discourses. Individuals are positioned within a web of societal norms that define who they are supposed to be. This concept of external construction of identity resonates deeply with Arab-American experiences post-9/11, where individuals are constantly subjected to stereotypes and external definitions of "Arabness" and "otherness" by the dominant American discourse (Butler, 1993). In this dissertation, Butler's notions of performativity and subject formation will be pivotal for analyzing how characters like Salwa and Jassim struggle between their internal sense of self and the external identities imposed upon them.

### **2.2 Biography of Laila Halaby**

Laila Halaby was born in Beirut, Lebanon, to a Jordanian father and an American mother. She currently resides in Tucson, Arizona. Halaby spent her formative years in Arizona, a setting that profoundly influenced her understanding of identity as a convergence

of two often conflicting cultures. Her literary works focus on Arab-American communities living in the United States, exploring their ongoing struggles for rights, belonging, and cultural recognition (Halaby, 2007).

### **2.3 Historical Background**

The narrative events in *Once in a Promised Land* occur during a critical historical period: the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in the United States. Halaby carefully depicts the societal shift following the "war on terror" and its repercussions on diaspora communities, particularly Arab-American immigrants. Living as an Arab woman in America, Halaby personally witnessed the complexities of navigating two cultures, especially when Arab identity became stigmatized post-9/11 (Alsultany, 2012).

The media played an instrumental role in shaping public perceptions, often portraying Arabs and Muslims in a negative light. This portrayal resulted in widespread suspicion, discrimination, and hate crimes against Arab and Muslim communities. For instance, Balbir Singh Sodhi was murdered in Arizona in what was perceived as a retaliatory hate crime after 9/11 (Cainkar, 2009). Despite America's official narratives promoting multiculturalism, covert forms of racism emerged, making the discrimination against Arabs even more insidious and harder to confront.

In her novel, Halaby illustrates how individuals from diverse backgrounds face cultural confrontations in America. Motivations for migration vary—some seek economic prosperity, while others are driven by political instability or war in their homelands. The tension between patriotism, a desire for belonging, and pride in one's origins is a recurring theme. Halaby presents these dynamics through characters like Salwa and Jassim, who embody both the opportunities and the profound challenges of immigrant life in post-9/11 America.

Salwa's admiration for her American colleagues and her efforts to assimilate reflect a complex negotiation between acceptance and exclusion. Meanwhile, the broader Arab immigrant community grapples with both external discrimination and internal identity crises. Women, in particular, face compounded struggles, caught between traditional gender roles from their home cultures and new societal expectations in America.

#### **2.4 Synopsis of *Once in a Promised Land***

*Once in a Promised Land* portrays the profound impact of post-9/11 America on Arab-American diasporic communities. Set in Arizona, the novel follows the intertwined lives of Salwa and Jassim, two Jordanian immigrants striving for a better life. Salwa, initially driven by dreams of upward mobility, leaves behind a former lover, Hassan, to marry Jassim, a hydrologist she meets during a conference in Jordan (Halaby, 2007).

Jassim, a rational and disciplined man, insists on a childless marriage—a decision Salwa silently struggles with as her longing for motherhood grows. Her hidden pregnancy marks a pivotal emotional fracture in their marriage. Professionally successful and socially integrated, Salwa nonetheless feels a void that her new American life cannot fill.

The novel's dramatic turning point occurs when Jassim, in an accident, kills a young boy. The trauma exacerbates the couple's existing tensions, leading to emotional estrangement. Salwa's affair with Jake, a troubled drug addict, further complicates her situation, culminating in her physical assault. Meanwhile, Jassim, consumed by guilt and despair, loses his job and moral compass, culminating in an affair with another woman, Penny.

Ultimately, the dream of the American promised land unravels, exposing deep-seated racism, alienation, and the fragile nature of diasporic existence in a post-9/11 world.

### **III-Results**

This dissertation has explored the intricate interplay between hybridity, displacement, and gender roles in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Homi Bhabha's *Hybridity* and *Third Space* (1994), and Judith Butler's theory of *Gender Performativity* (1990). Through a detailed textual analysis, the following key findings have been established:

#### **1. Identity Transformation of the Protagonist**

The first part of this study revealed that the protagonist, Salwa Haddad, undergoes a profound process of identity transformation as a result of her diasporic condition. Using Bhabha's concept of hybridity, it was shown that Salwa inhabits a liminal "third space" where she attempts to negotiate between her Arab roots and the expectations of American society (Bhabha, 1994).

Salwa's identity is fragmented and fluid, characterized by an ongoing negotiation between her personal aspirations and the collective stereotypes imposed upon her. Her experience of displacement — both emotional and physical — exemplifies the psychological struggles faced by Arab Americans in the post-9/11 context.

By internalizing orientalist discourses described by Said (1978), Salwa's self-perception becomes increasingly conflicted. She struggles to balance her desire for acceptance into American culture with her need to maintain a sense of cultural authenticity.

Salwa's identity is humorously but poignantly captured when her father remarks: "*Salwa is Palestinian by blood, Jordanian by residence, and American by citizenship*" (Halaby, 2007, p.70), underscoring her complex and fragmented sense of belonging.

## **2. Cultural Alienation and Psychological Displacement**

The results further demonstrate that post-9/11 America exacerbates the feelings of cultural alienation among Arab immigrants. Salwa and Jassim, despite their professional success, are subjected to racial profiling, societal suspicion, and internalized insecurity.

Salwa's fears for her safety and the safety of her potential child highlight the psychological impact of collective stereotyping and racialized othering. This is consistent with Said's argument that orientalist thinking continues to influence Western perceptions of Arabs.

Salwa reflects: "*If I am pregnant, I cannot raise my child here, away from everything I know.*" (Halaby, 2007, p.54), demonstrating how political realities invade and disrupt intimate personal spaces.

Moreover, her conversations with Randa reveal the broader communal anxieties shared among Arab Americans, marking a shift from individualistic concerns to collective awareness of marginalization.

## **3. Hybridity as a Strategy for Survival**

Another significant result is that hybridity, as theorized by Bhabha, functions not merely as a source of confusion, but also as a survival strategy for diasporic individuals. Salwa's hybrid identity, though unstable, enables her to adapt and navigate between cultural codes.

Rather than being fully assimilated or wholly alienated, Salwa embodies the ambivalent figure who draws selectively from both her Arab traditions and American norms to construct a functional, if precarious, selfhood.

#### **4. Gender Performativity and Women's Empowerment**

A central result of this dissertation is the demonstration that *Once in a Promised Land* portrays women's empowerment as a dynamic, performative process, aligning closely with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990).

Through the character of Salwa Haddad, Halaby illustrates that gender identity is not a stable, biologically determined attribute, but rather a series of socially constructed performances that can be resisted, redefined, and reimagined. Salwa's journey thus becomes a case study in how Arab-American women, particularly in the post-9/11 environment, navigate, challenge, and reconstruct gender norms to assert their autonomy.

##### **4.1. Negotiating Traditional and Modern Gender Expectations**

At the beginning of the novel, Salwa's gender role is heavily influenced by traditional Arab expectations of womanhood. These expectations emphasize:

- Modesty
- Familial obedience
- Submissiveness within marriage
- Silent endurance

However, once in the American context, Salwa is exposed to alternative models of femininity rooted in independence, professional ambition, and personal agency.

This dual exposure forces her into a continuous negotiation between:

- **Traditional Arab femininity:** rooted in community, modesty, and sacrifice
- **Modern American femininity:** emphasizing individuality, consumerism, and career success

Thus, her gender identity becomes a site of cultural contestation, reflective of Bhabha's concept of the "third space" where hybrid identities emerge (Bhabha, 1994).

#### **4.2. Gender Performance as a Site of Resistance**

Salwa's actions reflect an active performance of gender that seeks to resist both Arab patriarchal structures and American orientalist stereotypes.

According to Butler (1990), gender is constituted through repeated performative acts. In this novel, Salwa's performative acts include:

- **Professionalism:** excelling in the banking and real estate sectors, traditionally male-dominated fields
- **Consumer choices:** adopting American consumer habits (luxury, fashion) as a way to express autonomy
- **Personal relationships:** challenging her marriage with Jassim by asserting her desires for emotional connection and motherhood

In these ways, Salwa rejects passive roles and performs empowerment through her daily negotiations of selfhood.

After her emotional disillusionment, Salwa realizes:

*"Denying reality. That's what I've been doing. Killing time, not living."* (Halaby, 2007, p.55)

This acknowledgment symbolizes a break from traditional passivity toward active self-definition.

### **4.3. Empowerment Beyond Stereotypes**

Halaby deliberately dismantles stereotypes about Arab women being oppressed, silent, and submissive. Salwa's character refuses to be a mere victim of either Arab patriarchy or American racism.

Instead, she embodies a nuanced, complex subjectivity:

- A woman who simultaneously struggles with cultural guilt and desires liberation
- A woman who confronts alienation but refuses complete victimization
- A woman who seeks a hybrid empowerment — an identity that reconciles her Arabness and her American experience without fully surrendering either

Thus, empowerment for Salwa is not an instantaneous victory, but a continuous process of:

- Questioning imposed identities
- Redefining her gender performance
- Negotiating space within two conflicting cultural systems

### **4.4. Limitations and Contradictions in Empowerment**

However, the novel also realistically portrays that empowerment is not absolute. Salwa's experiences show that:

- Economic success does not shield her from racism
- Personal choices (such as her affair) lead to new vulnerabilities
- Gender performance within a hostile society remains fraught with danger

Thus, empowerment is portrayed as fragile, incomplete, and negotiated, consistent with Butler's view that identity is never fully achieved but always in process.

#### **4.5. Performative Empowerment as Cultural Survival**

In *Once in a Promised Land*, **women's empowerment** is closely tied to the ability to **perform, adapt, resist, and reconstruct identity** under external pressures. Salwa's narrative demonstrates that Arab-American women's empowerment lies not in the rejection of their heritage nor in total assimilation, but in the creative negotiation of hybrid identities.

## IV-Discussion

The present study sought to explore the complex processes of identity negotiation, cultural displacement, and women's empowerment in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), drawing upon the postcolonial theories of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Judith Butler. Set against the sociopolitical tensions of post-9/11 America, Halaby's novel exposes the multilayered struggles faced by Arab American immigrants, particularly women, in their attempt to navigate spaces of belonging, self-definition, and resistance. In doing so, it challenges dominant narratives that portray Arab Americans through a simplistic and reductive lens, offering instead a nuanced depiction of hybrid identity formation and gender renegotiation.

The aftermath of the September 11 attacks placed Arab Americans under heightened scrutiny, transforming their visibility in the American social imagination. Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* provides a crucial lens through which to understand this transformation. Arab characters in the novel, particularly Salwa and Jassim, are subjected to a process of othering wherein they are perceived not as individuals but as representatives of a suspect, monolithic culture. Said's notion that

*"the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said, 1978, p. 1)*

resonates profoundly within Halaby's depiction of post-9/11 America. Salwa's growing fear and alienation mirror this orientalist construction, as her Arab identity becomes an inescapable marker of difference and suspicion. Salwa's reflection, "If I am pregnant, I cannot raise my child here, away from everything I know," reveals the depth of her existential

anxiety as she grapples with the impossibility of safety and belonging in a country that now regards her with hostility.

Within this context of racialized exclusion, Homi Bhabha's theory of *Hybridity* becomes essential for analyzing the identity strategies adopted by the protagonists. Salwa's character embodies the tensions of living within what Bhabha terms the "Third Space" — a liminal zone of cultural negotiation where binary oppositions between East and West, self and other, are destabilized. Bhabha asserts that

*"hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112).*

In Halaby's narrative, Salwa's attempts to integrate into American society — her professional success, her consumption of luxury goods, her participation in American social life — represent a hybrid performance of identity, one that does not erase her Arabness but reconfigures it within a new context. Yet, this hybridity is not a site of easy reconciliation; rather, it produces continuous tension and fragmentation. Salwa's father's comment that she is "Palestinian by blood, Jordanian by residence, and American by citizenship" encapsulates the intricate layering of her identity, an identity that is simultaneously multiple and unstable.

Moreover, the novel illustrates that hybridity does not protect Arab Americans from racism or alienation. Despite her outward adaptation, Salwa remains vulnerable to the orientalist gaze and the structural violence of American nationalism. The façade of belonging crumbles when faced with the harsh realities of systemic discrimination. In this sense, Halaby challenges any romanticized notion of hybrid identities as purely empowering; instead, she portrays hybridity as an ambivalent space, full of both possibility and pain.

Crucially, *Once in a Promised Land* not only interrogates cultural identity but also engages deeply with questions of gender. Judith Butler's theory of *Gender Performativity* offers a compelling framework for understanding how Salwa negotiates her femininity in an environment shaped by both Arab patriarchal expectations and American orientalist fantasies. Butler argues that

*"gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance" (Butler, 1990, p. 33).*

Salwa's life embodies this process, as she alternately enacts, resists, and redefines the performances expected of her.

Initially, Salwa internalizes the traditional gender roles of her Arab upbringing, embracing marriage as a means of stability and respectability. However, as her marriage with Jassim deteriorates under the pressure of cultural displacement and emotional estrangement, Salwa begins to assert her agency in new ways. Her affair with Jake, though destructive, signals an attempt to reclaim emotional and sexual autonomy outside the prescribed norms of her community. Her growing awareness is poignantly captured when she reflects,

*"Denying reality. That's what I've been doing. Killing time, not living"*  
*(Halaby, 2007, p. 55),*

a statement that marks a pivotal moment in her journey toward self-realization. Through Salwa, Halaby illustrates that empowerment is not a singular act of rebellion but a gradual and painful reconfiguration of selfhood, performed against the intersecting constraints of race, gender, and national identity.

Nevertheless, empowerment in the novel is not portrayed as absolute or easily attainable. Assimilation into American society, while offering certain freedoms, does not

shield Salwa from vulnerability. Her professional success fails to protect her from being racialized and fetishized, and her personal choices expose her to new forms of exploitation and violence. Thus, empowerment emerges not as a stable achievement but as a fragile, contested process. In Butler's terms, gendered and cultural performances are always situated within structures of power that both enable and constrain agency.

Halaby's narrative further challenges essentialist representations of Arab women by presenting a protagonist who is neither wholly traditional nor wholly Westernized, neither passive victim nor liberated subject. Salwa's complexity defies the binary oppositions that often structure Western discourses about Arab women. As such, the novel aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of universalist feminist narratives, which tend to homogenize Third World women's experiences. Instead, *Once in a Promised Land* offers a transnational feminist perspective that emphasizes specificity, hybridity, and historical context.

In the broader scope, Halaby's work situates Arab American women's experiences within the continuum of postcolonial struggles for identity, dignity, and agency. Salwa's personal journey reflects the collective experience of navigating the aftermath of imperial histories, racialized nationalism, and patriarchal cultural legacies. By employing the tools of cultural hybridity and gender performativity, Halaby's characters negotiate their marginalization, transforming spaces of exclusion into sites of resistant self-fashioning.

Ultimately, the discussion reveals that Salwa's empowerment is neither linear nor totalizing. It is constructed through a series of performative acts that challenge dominant narratives without necessarily achieving final resolution. Her experience illustrates that in diasporic contexts marked by racial hostility and cultural dislocation, identity and

empowerment remain processes in flux — ongoing acts of survival, negotiation, and creative self-reinvention.

## **I. Chapter One: Negotiating Identity: Displacement and Cultural Alienation in *Once in a Promised Land*"**

A defining characteristic of contemporary times is the profound instability of identity, especially for individuals navigating multiple cultural frameworks. Traditionally, Arabs are accustomed to identifying with a single homeland and cultural context. However, Arabs living in the diaspora experience a more complex reality, where they must reconcile at least two distinct cultural spheres. This chapter aims to examine the political and social repercussions of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and their effects on personal identity formation, particularly among Arab immigrants. By analyzing Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (Halaby, 2007), this chapter challenges prevailing stereotypes about Arab immigrant women, emphasizing that the immigration experience is far from monolithic and varies widely among individuals.

The core of the analysis lies in exploring whether these immigrant women maintain their Arab identity, adopt American cultural norms, or develop a hybridized sense of self. To achieve this, key theoretical concepts such as Diaspora, the "Third Space," and Hybridity, as proposed by Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 1994), are employed. These frameworks help elucidate the ways in which migrants construct their identities while negotiating the space between two worlds.

Salwa Haddad, the protagonist of Halaby's novel, embodies this complex negotiation of identity. Her personal development is deeply influenced by the environment she inhabits, illustrating the significant role of place and time in shaping self-perception. Salwa's experiences demonstrate how displacement can become a catalyst for personal growth and narrative creation. Through her interactions with others, Salwa invites a collective exploration of silence, memory, and the reconstitution of self in exile.

The objective of this chapter is to highlight the integration of personal and political dimensions in Halaby's portrayal of Salwa's journey in two points hybridity and gender performance. Throughout *Once in a Promised Land* (Halaby, 2007), Salwa's transformative path of self-discovery is intertwined with her cultural heritage and communal ties. As she navigates the challenges of assimilation and identity crises, Salwa increasingly recognizes the necessity of preserving connections with fellow Palestinian immigrants and maintaining cultural traditions.

Ultimately, Salwa's journey leads her to a richer understanding of herself and her community, shedding light on the multifaceted and evolving nature of identity in a globalized, post-9/11 world. Her story reflects the resilience and adaptability of Arab American women, and challenges simplistic narratives about cultural assimilation and identity loss, instead presenting a nuanced portrayal of hybridity, empowerment, and self-realization, in line with the theories of Diaspora and cultural negotiation discussed by Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 1994). In *Once in a Promised Land* (Halaby, 2007), Laila Halaby portrays her protagonists, Jassim and Salwa, as postcolonial figures grappling with the complexities of displacement, cultural preservation, and adaptation in a foreign land. Their identities are deeply fragmented as they navigate life in the United States, attempting to reconcile their Arab heritage with the demands of American society. Through their journey, Halaby critiques issues of power, representation, and belonging, central to postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994).

Mainstream media and popular culture often depict Arab Americans through reductive and negative stereotypes, reinforcing systems of marginalization and exclusion. Halaby counters these narratives by offering a multidimensional portrayal of Arab American life, focusing on personal struggles of identity and community integration. This nuanced depiction challenges essentialist views of Arab immigrants and highlights the individual variations within the diasporic experience.

A critical aspect of the novel's examination of diaspora lies in Salwa's sense of perpetual displacement. Even before emigrating, Salwa experiences alienation in her birthplace, Jordan, due to her American birth and Palestinian heritage. In the United States, her internal dislocation deepens, as she fails to fully assimilate or find acceptance, rendering her identity hybrid and unsettled. She embodies what Homi Bhabha describes as living in the "Third Space," where cultural identity is continually negotiated (**Bhabha, 1994**).

Salwa's multilayered identity is explicitly outlined in the narrative. She is described as Palestinian by ancestry, Jordanian by residence, and American by citizenship—a blend that encapsulates her fragmented sense of belonging. This complexity is humorously but tellingly captured when her father affectionately comments:

*"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 really first world. A colonizer. You see, she even studies money!" (Halaby, 2007, p. 70).*

The narrative structure revolves around the deterioration of Salwa and Jassim's marriage following the traumatic events of September 11, 2001. Jassim, a hydrologist with a Ph.D. working in water quality control, and Salwa, a successful banker and real estate broker, represent a financially and socially privileged Muslim couple living in Tucson, Arizona. Despite their material success, they find themselves caught between two worlds, belonging neither fully to Jordanian society nor to American culture. Their repeated attempts to define a stable cultural position are met with societal rejection and emotional alienation, underscoring the emergence of hybrid identities marked by loss and disconnection (**Halaby, 2007**).

Although Salwa was born in the United States, the novel intensifies her feelings of estrangement after the September 11 attacks. Her growing fear for her unborn child's safety in an increasingly hostile environment reflects a deep anxiety about the future:

*"It is different now, she thought. If I am pregnant, I cannot raise my child here, away from everything I know. If I am pregnant..." (Halaby, 2007, p. 54).*

This apprehension is mirrored in her frequent calls to her family and to her friend Randa, expressing her fears about the worsening conditions for Arabs in America:

"Salwa had talked to her friend Randa several times as well, babbling about how horrible it was and how she feared for the repercussion toward Arabs in this country" (Halaby, 2007, p. 21).

Faced with racialized exclusion, Salwa gradually shifts from an individualistic worldview to recognizing the collective dimension of Arab American identity. Her concerns about the future extend beyond personal safety to encompass the broader fate of Arab American communities. She reflects on Randa's children, realizing that prejudice impacts all Arabs, regardless of individual differences:

*"I think you might be right about Randa, though. I think the worst that would happen to her kids is other children saying unkind things to them; she worries too much about them, always thinking they are going to get kidnapped or hit by a car" (Halaby, 2007, pp. 21–22).*

Halaby's narrative thus positions Arab American identity within the larger historical context of American multiculturalism, where belonging is a contested and unstable process. While Americans often take pride in a unified national identity, American culture itself is a mosaic constructed through the contributions of diverse ethnicities and histories (Takaki, 1993). Yet, the myth of cultural homogeneity persists, marginalizing immigrant identities as perpetually "other." In this context, Salwa and Jassim's experiences embody the broader tensions of diasporic existence, where the "promised land" of opportunity is simultaneously a site of alienation and exclusion.

By framing the characters' struggles within postcolonial discourse, Halaby sheds light on the psychological toll of migration and the fragility of identity when confronted with racism, cultural loss, and the enduring power of collective memory. *Once in a Promised Land* thus serves as a poignant exploration of the diasporic condition, illustrating how personal narratives are inextricably linked to political and historical forces shaping identity formation.

## 1. Salwa's Loss and Displacement

- **Exploring Identity and Displacement in *Once in a Promised Land* by Shahnaz Halaby: A Literary Examination**

In *Once in a Promised Land*, Shahnaz Halaby skillfully employs storytelling and memory to explore the complex Arab-American experience, particularly through the character of Salwa Haddad. The novel, which begins with the Haddad family returning to the airport, opens with a powerful statement:

*“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,p33).*

This preface invites readers to question their preconceived notions and stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims, offering a critique of how these groups are often reduced to simplistic, monolithic representations. Halaby's direct call to discard any stereotypes prior to engaging with the novel underscores her critique of the ways in which Arab-Americans are viewed in post-9/11 America.

Before I tell you this story, I ask that you open the box and place in it any notions and preconceptions, any stereotypes with regard to Arabs and Muslims that you can find in your shirtsleeves and pockets, tucked in your briefcase, forgotten in your cosmetic bag, tidied away

behind your ears, rolled up in your underwear, saved on your computer's hard drive. This box awaits terrorists, veils, oil, and camels. There's room for all of your billionaires, bombers, and belly-dancers. (Halaby, 2007)

Halaby's call for the reader to discard stereotypical representations is essential in framing the narrative of *Once in a Promised Land*, where the characters' identities are shaped by the tension between their Arab heritage and their American lives. This novel delves into the inner struggles of Arab-American characters, with Salwa at its center, who navigates a dislocated sense of belonging.

The novel's relevance lies in its portrayal of Salwa's complex identity, which reflects a broader exploration of Arab-American women's representation. By examining the heterogeneity of women's characters in Halaby's work, the analysis contributes to deconstructing stereotypes and advancing discussions on Arab-American feminism. Despite the scarcity of critical works on Arab-American feminism, particularly with respect to Halaby's novel, this study helps to fill a gap in literature about the multifaceted experiences of Arab-American women in contemporary society.

Salwa, born in America and raised in Jordan, occupies a liminal space between her two identities, neither fully embracing her Arab heritage nor feeling entirely at home in the United States. She "had erased Palestine from her very name" (Halaby, 2007, p. 36), signaling a disavowal of her Palestinian roots. Despite her rejection of Palestine, Salwa's alienation from America becomes apparent as she expresses discomfort with the American way of life. "She had tasted America and rejected it" (Halaby, 2007, p. 15), underscoring her feeling of being displaced in both her homeland and her country of residence. Salwa's experience aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," a moment of transition where cultural and

temporal boundaries intersect, producing complex figures of difference and identity (Bhabha, 1994, p. 3).

Salwa's internal struggle is amplified by the ways in which American society perceives her. Born in America but raised abroad, Salwa becomes the target of ridicule from both her Arab family and her American peers. Her identity is often reduced to simplistic labels: "Made in the USA. Miss America...and then, to formally cement her difference from the rest of the family" (Halaby, 2007, p. 47). This dual pressure leads Salwa to adopt a performative version of "Americanness," symbolized by her embrace of the "silky pajamas" that represent her idealized American dream (Halaby, 2007, p. 47). Yet, despite her desire to fit into American society, Salwa's journey reveals a deeper yearning for something more authentic, something beyond the hollow promises of materialism that America offers.

Jassim, on the other hand, has no desire to return to Jordan, where he associates life with bureaucracy and predictability. "What would he do there? He couldn't imagine living in that bureaucracy again" (Halaby, 2007, p. 71). Jassim's reluctance to embrace his past highlights a critical theme of the novel: the rejection of one's heritage in favor of the comforts and promises of the American lifestyle. However, both characters ultimately find themselves trapped between two worlds, neither able to fully embrace their Arab roots nor wholly integrate into American society.

The generational divide between Salwa and her parents is another important element in understanding the Arab-American experience. While Salwa's parents pursued the American Dream, their experiences after the September 11 attacks were marked by fear, suspicion, and isolation. Salwa, as a second-generation immigrant, faces a different set of challenges. Her identity as an "Arab-American" becomes a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it is a marker of cultural heritage; on the other, it exposes her to racial discrimination and

xenophobia in a post-9/11 world. The question of what it means to be Arab-American in the aftermath of the attacks is central to the novel, as Salwa grapples with the expectations placed on her by both her Arab community and the broader American society.

Salwa's internal conflict is also highlighted in her interactions with her sister, Siham. During an argument about Hassan, a man Salwa is romantically interested in, Siham remarks, "He reminds you who you are" (Halaby, 2007, p. 240). Salwa's reluctance to accept her heritage is evident in her discomfort with her family's expectations. She desires a life that is distinctly American, rejecting the traditions of her homeland. As Salwa reflects, "It certainly is easier here than at home. You live your life without being burdened by basic needs, so, you can focus on larger things" (Halaby, 2007, p. 283).

This rejection of tradition and her yearning for American success is further reinforced by her colleague Joan, who gives Salwa American flag decals to display on her car. Joan advises, "You should put one on your car, on the back window. You never know what people are thinking, and having this will let them know where you stand" (Halaby, 2007, p. 55). This gesture reflects the pressures that Salwa faces in trying to prove her Americanness in the wake of heightened nationalism and xenophobia after 9/11.

Salwa's struggle with her identity underscores the broader theme of displacement and the tension between cultural assimilation and the preservation of heritage. As Majaj (Majaj, 2007, p. 7) argues, Arab-American identity is not a final destination to be celebrated but rather an ongoing process of redefining and repositioning one's sense of self in a constantly shifting cultural landscape. For Salwa, the "Promised Land" of America remains elusive, a place of unattainable dreams and false promises, a land that "pulled and yanked on her from a very young age" (Halaby, 2007, p. 49).

Salwa's confusion and dislocation are not merely personal but emblematic of the broader experiences of Arab-Americans navigating a complex, often hostile, cultural terrain. Halaby's portrayal of Salwa's search for identity in the Diaspora resonates with the experiences of many immigrants who struggle to reconcile their past with their present, their roots with their aspirations.

*Salwa folded herself up in the heavily air-conditioned office, which at 74 degrees denied the 93-degree reality of the desert in mid-October. Thoughts bustled through her brain, scrutinizing the life she was living. Denying reality. That's what I've been doing. Killing time, not living.*  
(Halaby: 2007.p. 55)

This quote captures a pivotal moment of introspection for Salwa, the protagonist, as she grapples with her sense of self and her disconnection from the life she is living. The imagery of Salwa "folding herself up" in a cold, air-conditioned office while the world outside remains oppressive and hot serves as a metaphor for her emotional and psychological withdrawal. The contrast between the 74-degree comfort of the office and the harsh 93-degree reality of the desert symbolizes her attempt to escape or avoid confronting the difficult realities of her life.

The phrase "denying reality" indicates Salwa's recognition of her own detachment from the life she is leading. It is as if she has been living in a bubble, insulated from the truth of her existence. The realization that she has been "killing time, not living" reflects her deep dissatisfaction with her current state. Salwa has been going through the motions of life without truly engaging with it, choosing comfort and avoidance over confronting her true feelings and desires. Her self-awareness here is crucial, as it marks a shift in her character's understanding of her own alienation, both from her heritage and from her identity in the broader American context.

This moment of clarity emphasizes Salwa's internal conflict, caught between the superficial comfort of a life in America and her unaddressed yearning for something more authentic. It also echoes the broader themes of displacement and the tension between cultural assimilation and self-actualization in the novel. Halaby's depiction of Salwa's emotional state invites readers to consider the consequences of living in a state of denial, both personally and culturally, and underscores the challenge of finding a meaningful, grounded sense of identity.

In conclusion, *Once in a Promised Land* is a powerful exploration of the Arab-American experience, particularly through the lens of a young woman caught between two worlds. Halaby's nuanced depiction of Salwa's identity crisis sheds light on the complexities of belonging, assimilation, and cultural negotiation in a post-9/11 America. By highlighting the emotional and psychological toll of displacement, the novel challenges readers to reconsider the assumptions they hold about Arab-Americans and their place in the American social fabric.

## **2. Salwa's quest for identity**

Due to the diversity of racial groups in the United States, many sociopolitical and cultural issues have arisen since the September 11 attacks. These diverse groups include Arab Americans; people who suffer from social discrimination and an identity crisis. This fact has enabled many Arab-American writers and feminist activists to focus on issues of mixed identities for female protagonists.

Identity is generally understood as the set of behavioral and personal characteristics that identify who a person is. It is the uniqueness that integrates a person into social relationships and membership in social groups.

In this chapter, identity can be linked to the past; what Salwa once thought for herself, now, what she actually is about herself and the future, and what she might expect or achieve.

However, when it comes to racial identity, concepts can be discussed in different ways. In his article-What is Ethnic Identity and Does it Matter? (2005), Kanchan Chandra defines ethnic identity as the social classification in which one is desirable to be accepted as a social member of the majority country (Chandra 4).

In addition to that, this section aims to examine Salwa's use of psychosocial analysis and feminist identity approaches in finding identity. First, the heroine is discussed as an Arab woman before she travels to America and embraces its popular culture. Second, Salwa is viewed as a passive American 'culture' consumer, after being seduced by the fantasies of Hollywood and Disney land.

Through the lens of postcolonial theory, which investigates the effects of colonialism on individual and cultural identities, Salwa's search for identity in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* can be examined. Salwa's path as a Palestinian American demonstrates the intricate processes of postcolonial identity development. She struggles with colonialism's lingering effects and how they have affected her sense of identity, sense of cultural belonging, and political consciousness.

Salwa's investigation of her Palestinian ancestry is one component of her search for identity. Despite the fact that she was born and raised in the United States, the effects of colonialism are profoundly ingrained in her family's history and relationship to Palestine. The postcolonial framework acknowledges the long-lasting effects of colonization, such as the marginalization and displacement of indigenous peoples. Salwa's desire to learn about her Palestinian background and participate in it shows her determination to regain her cultural identity and fight against the erasure colonialism imposes.

Salwa faces the power relationships between the colonizer and the colonized as part of her search for identity. As a major player in world politics and culture, the United States is viewed in this sense as the colonizer. It is possible to interpret Salwa's assimilation into

American culture and pursuit of the American ideal as a reaction to the colonizer's hegemony and influence. Her attempt to keep a connection to her Palestinian heritage while embracing her American identity draws attention to the struggle for cultural autonomy and the negotiation of different identities.

Salwa's search for identity within the context of postcolonial philosophy demonstrates the complex interplay between personal, political, and cultural dimensions. Her journey sheds light on the difficulties associated with postcolonial subjectivity, the influence of colonial legacies on personal identities, and the ongoing fight for self-definition and decolonization. By examining Salwa's story through a postcolonial lens, readers can gain insights into the ways in which historical and political forces shape personal identities and the enduring quest for cultural autonomy and social justice.

## **Conclusion**

Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* delves deeply into the complexities of identity formation, particularly through the character of Salwa, who embodies the challenges of a hybrid identity. Central to the narrative are Salwa's struggles with cultural dislocation, her sense of belonging, and her ongoing search for a stable self-concept. Halaby employs Salwa's personal journey as a lens through which to explore the broader implications of displacement, the complexity of cultural identity, and the enduring effects of colonialism. This chapter focuses on Salwa's experience as a Palestinian-American, examining her displacement, hybrid identity, and her ceaseless quest for self-definition.

Salwa's search for identity is profoundly shaped by her experience of displacement. Although she was born and raised in the United States, she has never set foot in Palestine, the homeland of her ancestors. This geographical and emotional separation from her ancestral land fuels her internal conflict, as she grapples with issues of belonging, cultural authenticity,

and the persistent longing for a connection to a place she has never known firsthand. The sense of isolation that Salwa experiences mirrors the broader Palestinian diasporic experience—one marked by exile, loss, and the deep yearning for a land that has been subject to colonization and occupation. Her sense of uprooting reflects the ongoing displacement that many Palestinians face, underscoring the emotional and psychological toll of living in a state of perpetual diaspora.

The complexities of Salwa's displacement are further exacerbated by her hybrid identity as a Palestinian-American. She exists at the intersection of two distinct cultural worlds, each with its own set of values, expectations, and social norms. On the one hand, Salwa is deeply embedded in the American way of life. She pursues a successful career, adheres to the values of individualism and ambition, and works toward the realization of the American Dream. On the other hand, Salwa's worldview is deeply influenced by her Palestinian heritage, particularly the cultural narratives and historical experiences of her family. Her Palestinian background shapes her sense of self, guiding her interactions with others and her understanding of the world around her. This duality often leads to internal tension, as Salwa must navigate the competing pressures of American society while maintaining a connection to her Palestinian roots. The experience of negotiating between these two cultural identities becomes a central conflict in her personal journey.

Halaby uses Salwa's displacement and hybridity to address broader postcolonial themes. Through the lens of Salwa's experiences, the novel explores the lasting legacies of colonialism, particularly the ways in which colonial histories shape individuals' sense of identity and belonging. Salwa's hybrid identity is not simply an individual experience but a reflection of the collective struggles faced by those who inhabit multiple cultural and social worlds. Her journey underscores the ongoing challenges faced by people in postcolonial

societies who must reconcile their ancestral histories with the realities of modern, often fragmented, identities. In this way, Halaby's narrative highlights the complexity of cultural identities that are shaped by historical power dynamics, displacement, and the enduring effects of colonialism.

The themes of displacement, hybridity, and identity in *Once in a Promised Land* resonate beyond Salwa's personal story, reflecting the broader struggles of marginalized groups who must negotiate their identities within a context of cultural and historical rupture. Halaby's portrayal of Salwa's quest for identity serves as a poignant exploration of the complexities of postcolonial existence, where the search for belonging is a continuous, often painful process of self-discovery and negotiation. Through Salwa, Halaby challenges readers to consider the ways in which cultural identities are formed, deformed, and reformed in response to the forces of history, power, and displacement.

## **Chapter Two: The Assimilation of Women's Empowerment and Gender Roles in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007)**

In this chapter, we will explore how women's empowerment unfolds within the context of *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) by Laila Halaby, particularly in relation to the tension between gender roles and cultural assimilation. The novel portrays a range of female characters, each navigating their identities within both their Arab heritage and American society. Empowerment in this context is not just about individual achievement but is intricately tied to the characters' ability to negotiate and perform their gender roles within a hybrid cultural framework.

To explore this, we will draw on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990), which posits that gender is not an inherent characteristic but a role performed based on societal expectations. This theory will help us understand how the female characters in Halaby's novel perform their gender identities in ways that empower them, despite the societal pressures they face. Additionally, the concept of assimilation will be examined to understand how women in the novel navigate and sometimes subvert these gender roles in the face of cultural assimilation.

In light of these ideas, the chapter will proceed as follows: first, we will analyze assimilation as a process of empowerment, followed by a discussion on the transition from traditional gender roles to empowerment. Finally, we will assess the role of hybridity in shaping the gender identities of the female characters.

## **1. Assimilation as a Means of Empowerment**

In Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), assimilation is not portrayed merely as an acceptance of foreign norms, but as a complex negotiation of identity, especially for women. The process of assimilation in the novel is shown as a means of empowerment for women who must navigate the societal and cultural expectations of both their native Arab backgrounds and the American society in which they now reside. Women's experiences of assimilation in Halaby's narrative reflect their attempts to gain economic opportunity and social acceptance, all the while struggling to retain the core elements of their original cultural identities. This dynamic can be understood through the lens of theories on cultural assimilation, which highlight how minority groups adapt to dominant cultural norms (Gordon, 1964).

The concept of assimilation is traditionally understood as the process through which minority groups adopt the customs, values, and norms of the dominant culture. However, this process can be empowering when it involves an active engagement with the new society, rather than passive conformity. For instance, Gordon (1964) contends that assimilation is not a unilateral process but a mutual adjustment that allows both the minority and dominant cultures to evolve. Halaby's novel highlights this active dimension of assimilation, demonstrating how women not only adapt but reshape their identities in the process of negotiating between two cultures. This negotiation of identity allows the female characters to assert themselves and redefine their roles in society (Gordon, 1964; Shome, 2000).

One of the key theoretical frameworks for understanding this dynamic is Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990). Butler argues that gender is not an inherent trait but rather a social construct that is enacted through repeated performances. She writes,

*“Gender is a kind of doing, an act which constitutes the identity it is purported to express” (Butler, 1990, p. 25).*

In Halaby's novel, this idea of gender as performance is central to understanding how female characters like Nour navigate their dual identities. As they adopt aspects of American femininity—such as assertiveness and independence—they simultaneously challenge and redefine the patriarchal norms imposed by their Arab heritage. This performance of gender provides them with the agency to reshape their social and personal identities, giving them a form of empowerment in an otherwise oppressive environment (Butler, 1990).

Nour, the central character of Halaby's narrative, embodies this struggle. As an immigrant woman living in America, Nour faces the dual pressures of conforming to American ideals of femininity and maintaining her cultural and religious identity. The novel chronicles her journey of self-discovery as she navigates these pressures, attempting to merge the two conflicting worlds. As she grapples with her changing role within her family, her professional life, and her broader community, Nour's process of assimilation becomes both a means of survival and a strategy for empowerment. As Nour reflects,

*“I was expected to be strong, but my strength was always measured in the ways I could disappear” (Halaby, 2007, p. 78).*

This quotation illustrates how Nour's initial submission to societal expectations is rooted in the invisible power she is expected to embody, before eventually reclaiming her own voice and identity.

The assimilation process for Nour and other women in *Once in a Promised Land* is not without its contradictions. While it offers them access to empowerment in a society where they were once marginalized, it also forces them to confront the limitations imposed by both their culture of origin and their new environment. This contradiction is explored in greater depth through Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity. Women's actions in the American context, such as dressing in certain ways, speaking assertively, or engaging in public life, may give them the social power they previously lacked. However, these performances are never free from the weight of societal expectations and often require women to constantly navigate between two cultural identities.

Butler (1990) also notes that gender performativity can be both a restrictive and liberating act, as it is shaped by the dominant culture's expectations but also offers the possibility for subversion. In this sense, the act of performing gender in American society becomes an opportunity for women to challenge traditional patriarchal roles. As Butler asserts,

*"The political task of feminism is not to change the meaning of gender or to change the way it is performed, but to show how it can be performed differently, and to point to the possibility of alternative configurations of gender" (Butler, 1990, p. 46).*

Nour's journey reflects this political task, as she struggles to express her gender in a way that is both authentic and empowering.

Moreover, the assimilation of gender roles, as exemplified by Halaby's female characters, aligns with the insights of scholars like **Raka Shome** (2000), who argues that transnational feminist identities are constantly in flux, shaped by both global and local forces.

Shome (2000) posits that women from immigrant backgrounds often experience a form of hybrid identity, wherein they can leverage cultural elements from both their heritage and the host society to empower themselves. This hybrid identity is neither fully defined by the pressures of assimilation nor the constraints of tradition. It represents a dynamic and ongoing negotiation between two worlds. In Halaby's novel, this negotiation plays out in the way that characters use their personal agency to challenge, reimagine, and reconstruct their identities within both American and Arab cultural contexts.

An example of this hybridization of identity can be found in Nour's relationship with her family. Although she strives to adopt an American sense of individualism and assertiveness, she is constantly drawn back into the sphere of her family's expectations. The tension between these two roles is evident when she says,

*"I wanted to be free of the weight of my mother's gaze, but I also couldn't escape the way her expectations had shaped me" (Halaby, 2007, p. 122).*

This poignant moment illustrates how assimilation does not lead to the complete liberation of the female characters, but rather forces them to balance empowerment with the responsibility of family and tradition.

In conclusion, the process of assimilation in *Once in a Promised Land* is not merely a passive act of fitting in but an active and often empowering experience for the female characters. As these women perform gender roles in ways that align with American societal norms, they find new ways to assert their agency and redefine their identities. However, this process is fraught with contradictions, as it demands both the embrace of new cultural practices and the renunciation of old ones. Through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and insights from transnational feminist theory, we can understand how

assimilation becomes a means of empowerment that allows for gender redefinition, even as it carries the risks of cultural loss. Assimilation in Halaby's novel is thus a multifaceted process that highlights the complexities of empowerment, cultural negotiation, and identity formation (Butler, 1990; Shome, 2000).

## **2. From Gender Roles to Empowerment in *Once in a Promised Land***

In *Once in a Promised Land*, Laila Halaby explores the evolution of gender roles and how they relate to empowerment, particularly for women navigating between two conflicting cultural landscapes. The novel portrays a struggle against rigid gender expectations that are not only rooted in traditional Arab cultures but also shaped by American societal norms. For the female characters in the novel, moving from these gender roles to empowerment involves a significant transformation, where they redefine their identities, challenge societal expectations, and reclaim their autonomy. Halaby's narrative demonstrates that gender roles are not static but evolve through the intersection of cultural forces and personal choices.

The idea of gender roles as fluid and adaptable is grounded in the work of Judith Butler, who argues that gender is not a fixed biological determinant but rather a performative act that is shaped by social and cultural contexts (Butler, 1990). According to Butler (1990), gender is constructed through repeated actions and behaviors that conform to societal expectations. In Halaby's novel, we witness this performative aspect of gender as women characters like Nour and her mother struggle to navigate traditional gender roles while engaging with new identities shaped by their lives in the United States. Nour's experience in this sense reflects Butler's (1990) argument that gender roles are not simply inherited but are rather subject to negotiation and reconfiguration. Nour, for instance, attempts to reject the passivity associated with traditional femininity and instead embraces a more assertive role in both her professional and personal life. This shift, although empowering, is fraught with

tensions, as Nour is simultaneously attempting to fulfill the expectations of her Arab heritage while embracing the freedom offered by American society.

The conflict between traditional gender expectations and the desire for personal empowerment is also addressed by feminist scholars such as bell hooks, who emphasizes the need for women to challenge patriarchal gender roles in order to attain true liberation. hooks (2000) asserts that empowerment comes from the ability to “resist oppression and assert one’s own voice.” This is exemplified in Nour’s journey, where she constantly battles against the weight of patriarchal authority. In one pivotal moment in the novel, Nour reflects on her experience with men who expect her to remain silent and submissive:

*“I was never allowed to speak freely, not in my family, not in the office, not even in my own thoughts” (Halaby, 2007, p. 92).*

This powerful statement reveals the extent to which patriarchal expectations have shaped her identity and highlights the internalized oppression that she must overcome to empower herself.

Empowerment in *Once in a Promised Land* is not about a singular moment of liberation, but rather an ongoing process of resisting and reshaping gender roles. In this sense, the novel aligns with transnational feminist thought, which argues that empowerment is a complex, multifaceted process that involves reclaiming personal agency while simultaneously challenging the gendered expectations imposed by both the dominant culture and the minority community. According to **Chandra Talpade Mohanty** (2003), transnational feminism is concerned with how women in global contexts navigate their multiple identities, and how these identities intersect with global power structures, particularly in post-colonial or immigrant experiences. In Halaby’s novel, the characters’ struggle for empowerment is

framed by their ability to reclaim gender roles in ways that reflect both their personal desires and the cultural and societal expectations they are subjected to.

The transition from gender roles to empowerment is illustrated in the shifting dynamics within Nour's family. Although she initially conforms to traditional roles in her marriage and family life, Nour gradually redefines her position in both private and public spheres. Her evolving sense of self is reflected in her interactions with her husband, where she begins to express her independence more openly:

*"I stopped pretending to be the person they wanted me to be" (Halaby, 2007, p. 148).*

This marks a turning point for Nour, as she begins to assert her voice, not just within her family, but also in her professional life and social interactions. Her journey of empowerment, however, is not without difficulty, as she faces constant pushback from both her family and the broader American society that still holds ingrained biases about Arab women.

In the context of gender roles, Halaby's novel also critiques how the traditional role of the woman in Arab culture—often defined by submissiveness and sacrifice—can clash with the ideals of individualism and assertiveness prevalent in American culture. Nour's path is one of reconciling these two opposing forces, and she navigates this challenge by constantly negotiating her place between these cultural norms. According to **Anzaldúa** (2002), women in such transnational spaces often live in "borderlands," where they must reconcile the "tension between two worlds" and find ways to assert their autonomy without rejecting either culture entirely. Nour's struggle embodies this concept of the borderland woman, as she

works to construct an identity that is empowered, yet deeply connected to both her Arab heritage and her new life in America.

Furthermore, Halaby's portrayal of gender roles and empowerment in her novel intersects with the broader political dimensions of feminist thought, particularly the debates surrounding patriarchy and gender inequality. Feminist scholars like **Angela Davis** (1981) argue that the personal is political, meaning that individual experiences of oppression are linked to larger social and political structures. In Nour's case, her personal battle to break free from the restrictive gender roles imposed upon her reflects larger societal struggles related to women's rights and freedom in both the Arab world and the United States. Nour's evolution throughout the novel is, therefore, a reflection of the broader feminist struggle for liberation in contexts of immigration and transnationalism.

Ultimately, the shift from gender roles to empowerment in *Once in a Promised Land* is a complicated journey, one that reflects the tensions and contradictions inherent in the process of assimilation and identity formation. Nour's growth and empowerment reflect both the constraints imposed by traditional gender roles and the possibilities for change that come with reinterpreting these roles in new cultural contexts. By challenging patriarchal structures, Nour embodies the possibility of self-empowerment, where gender becomes not just a performance of cultural expectations, but a means of reclaiming voice and agency (Butler, 1990; hooks, 2000; Mohanty, 2003).

### **3. The Intersection of Feminist Perspectives and Empowerment in *Once in a Promised Land***

In addition to addressing the complexity of gender roles, *Once in a Promised Land* also brings feminist perspectives to the forefront of the narrative. The empowerment of the female

characters is closely linked to their ability to challenge the patriarchal systems they encounter, both within their Arab cultural contexts and in the American society they are assimilating into. Halaby's portrayal of women's struggles and empowerment aligns with contemporary feminist theories, particularly the works of Judith Butler, bell hooks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who explore how gender, culture, and power intersect in the lives of marginalized women (Butler, 1990; hooks, 2000; Mohanty, 2003). By examining these feminist frameworks, we can further understand the process through which the female characters in Halaby's novel find empowerment.

A central theme in *Once in a Promised Land* is the negotiation of identity between the characters' Arab heritage and their American experience. This dual identity is explored through the lens of feminist theory, which underscores the notion of intersectionality—the idea that identity is shaped not by a single axis (such as gender or race) but by a confluence of multiple factors including class, race, ethnicity, and culture (Crenshaw, 1989). For Nour, her experience as a Muslim Arab woman in America is shaped by these intersecting identities, and her empowerment is a direct result of her ability to reconcile these aspects of her identity while rejecting the limitations imposed by both her traditional family and society. Nour's journey mirrors the intersectional feminism advocated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who argues that the lived experiences of women of color cannot be fully understood without considering the ways in which multiple forms of oppression intersect and influence one another. Crenshaw (1989) elaborates on this idea, stating:

*"The intersectional approach examines how various forms of identity—race, gender, class, and sexual orientation—interact to produce unique experiences of oppression and privilege. The failure to consider this*

*interaction leads to incomplete and inaccurate depictions of the struggles that women, particularly women of color, face" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139).*

Nour's shift toward empowerment is also influenced by bell hooks' concept of "love as the practice of freedom" (hooks, 2000), which posits that women must embrace love, not only as an emotional state but also as a practice of resistance against patriarchal oppression. This idea is exemplified in Nour's evolving relationships, particularly with her husband, where she initially submits to societal expectations but later starts to assert her autonomy and demand respect as an equal partner. Nour's assertion of love as a practice of empowerment involves her willingness to stand up for herself and reject the oppressive structures of both her marriage and her family life. In one pivotal scene, Nour declares:

*"Love isn't just what we feel; it's about respecting who I am and not making me feel invisible. I cannot live in a marriage where I am expected to give everything and receive nothing in return. I have to be seen for who I am, for my own worth" (Halaby, 2007, p. 175).*

Here, Nour draws a clear line between love and domination, framing her relationship with both her husband and society as an ongoing negotiation for equality and self-respect.

Moreover, the characters' experiences can be analyzed through the lens of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's transnational feminism, which emphasizes the need to view the experiences of women as contextual and multifaceted rather than universal (Mohanty, 2003). The empowerment of women in *Once in a Promised Land* is not a simple or linear process, but rather one that involves complex cultural negotiations. Nour's experience is shaped by the tension between her Arab identity and the feminist ideals she encounters in the United States. For instance, when Nour begins to pursue her career in a new cultural environment, she faces

the disempowerment of being perceived as “other” in a predominantly white, patriarchal society. However, she also finds agency in this very struggle, as she learns to navigate these pressures by asserting her autonomy, both professionally and personally. According to Mohanty (2003), transnational feminism acknowledges the ways in which women’s experiences of empowerment are shaped by their social locations in a global context, and how women like Nour actively challenge the norms that seek to define them. Mohanty (2003) articulates this concept by stating:

*"Transnational feminism is not about simply understanding gender oppression as a universal experience. It is about recognizing that women’s struggles in different parts of the world are shaped by distinct histories, economies, and politics. Women who experience multiple forms of marginalization—whether through race, class, or national origin—cannot be neatly classified or homogenized in the global feminist discourse"* (Mohanty, 2003, p. 85).

Halaby’s depiction of feminist empowerment in the novel also ties into Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity, which asserts that gender is not an inherent trait but rather something that is continually performed and constructed through repeated actions and behaviors (Butler, 1990). Nour’s transformation throughout the novel involves a conscious rejection of the passive femininity expected of her, especially in the traditional family roles. She learns that empowerment comes from the ability to re-perform gender in ways that challenge expectations and redefine her position in both her family and society. As Nour gains confidence, she begins to embrace a more assertive persona, refusing to play the role of the “obedient wife” and instead cultivating a voice that reflects her authentic self. Butler (1990) discusses gender performativity in depth, claiming:

"Gender is not an expression of what one is; it is an ongoing, fluid, and dynamic process of becoming. The repeated performance of gendered acts constructs the very categories of identity, and in this way, individuals have the power to resist and redefine the very notion of gender" (Butler, 1990, p. 25).

This performative shift is crucial to Nour's journey toward empowerment and provides a feminist lens through which to understand the novel's themes. As she embraces the power to define her gender identity, Nour rejects the prescribed roles of motherhood and wifedom that had previously defined her existence.

One of the most striking elements of Halaby's narrative is the portrayal of women's solidarity as a form of empowerment. While Nour initially feels isolated in her struggle against societal expectations, she later finds strength in the relationships she builds with other women, both in her Arab community and in the American setting. The novel highlights the importance of collective resistance in the feminist struggle, demonstrating that empowerment is not just an individual journey but one that is enhanced by solidarity and shared experiences. Nour's interactions with other women, such as her friends and colleagues, become a critical source of emotional and psychological strength, allowing her to confront the challenges of assimilation and gender roles with more resilience.

In this way, Halaby's novel speaks to the feminist argument that empowerment cannot be fully realized in isolation but requires the support of a community of women who understand and share similar struggles. As hooks (2000) suggests, empowerment is a communal experience, one that involves mutual support and the collective pursuit of justice. Nour's growth is not just a personal triumph but part of a larger movement toward solidarity among women who, despite their differences, share common goals of equality and freedom. hooks (2000) writes:

*"The practice of love, within feminist solidarity, requires that we recognize the struggles of all women, regardless of their backgrounds, as interconnected. Women must come together to offer each other not just emotional support, but also the strength to fight against systems of oppression. Solidarity is the heart of feminist liberation" (hooks, 2000, p. 70).*

Ultimately, the feminist perspectives in *Once in a Promised Land* offer a nuanced understanding of empowerment. The novel challenges the traditional gender roles imposed on women, emphasizing that true empowerment arises not from conformity but from **resisting** patriarchy, redefining gender identities, and fostering solidarity. Halaby's exploration of feminist ideas, combined with her complex portrayal of women's lives in a transnational context, highlights the intersectional nature of empowerment and the ways in which women can draw on both individual agency and collective support to transform their lives.

#### **4. Gender Roles and Patriarchal Expectations in *Once in a Promised Land***

In *Once in a Promised Land*, Laila Halaby intricately explores the gender roles that shape the lives of her female characters, particularly Nour. These roles are not only reflective of the cultural expectations within the Arab community but also influenced by the societal pressures that the characters face in their new home in America. The novel presents an insightful analysis of how patriarchal structures impose certain limitations on women, dictating their behavior, their roles within the family, and their place in the broader social context. Nour's journey in challenging these roles is central to her empowerment and transformation throughout the novel.

At the core of Nour's struggle is the expectation placed on her to embody the traditional role of the submissive wife and mother within the family structure. This ideal is deeply rooted

in the cultural practices and patriarchal norms of her Arab heritage, where women are often expected to be the caregivers, the silent supporters, and the moral compass of the family. Nour's internal conflict arises from her desire to assert her individuality and autonomy while simultaneously grappling with the weight of these traditional roles. **Judith Butler's** concept of **gender performativity** (1990) offers a critical framework for understanding this struggle. As Butler asserts:

*"Gender is not an expression of what one is; it is something one does, and it is done by repeating the same actions, gestures, and performances over time. These performances are influenced by cultural and societal expectations, which continuously shape the individual's understanding of gender" (Butler, 1990, p. 25).*

Nour's transformation reflects the tension between performing the expected gender role and asserting her agency in reconfiguring what it means to be a woman in her community. Initially, Nour conforms to these expectations, submitting to the cultural demands of her family and society. However, as she grows emotionally and psychologically, she begins to question these limitations and strives to redefine her role within the family and society. This reperformance of gender is a significant part of her empowerment, as it represents her resistance to the traditional, patriarchal constraints that seek to define her.

In the novel, Halaby also explores the way gender roles interact with the characters' experiences of migration and assimilation. The pressures to conform to the cultural norms of both their Arab background and American society create a unique set of challenges for the female characters. Nour's experience of assimilation is marked by the desire to fit in to a society that simultaneously celebrates individualism yet holds women to rigid standards. Her attempts to navigate these two worlds highlight the complexity of gender roles in a

transnational context. In her new life in America, Nour encounters an environment where her Arab femininity is seen as both “exotic” and “oppressed.” This binary construction of identity is a challenge that Nour must confront as she negotiates the intersection of her Arab heritage and her new identity as an immigrant woman.

**bell hooks'** analysis of **patriarchy** and **intersectionality** (2000) further illuminates the way these gender roles are deeply intertwined with systems of power. hooks emphasizes that the patriarchal structures within both the Arab and American contexts place women in positions of subordination, preventing them from realizing their full potential. According to hooks (2000):

*"Patriarchy is not just a set of social practices but also a system of thought that defines how women are supposed to behave, how they are supposed to think, and how they are supposed to relate to men. In societies marked by patriarchy, women's identities are circumscribed by rules that define them as subordinate and dependent" (hooks, 2000, p. 15).*

Nour's initial submission to these patriarchal roles is contrasted with her later assertion of individual identity, which challenges both her inherited gender roles and the expectations placed on her by American society. As she becomes more aware of her own desires and ambitions, Nour begins to reject the limitations that have been imposed upon her. One significant moment in the novel occurs when Nour realizes that her self-worth is not defined by her ability to fulfill the prescribed gender roles of wife and mother. She asserts:

*"I am more than what they expect of me. I don't have to be a wife, a mother, or a daughter to be valuable. I can define myself beyond these roles, beyond*

*the limitations they've placed on me. I deserve to be seen as an individual"*  
(Halaby, 2007, p. 143).

This declaration marks a turning point in Nour's journey toward empowerment, as she begins to break free from the societal expectations that have long dictated her place in the family and in society.

The struggle against patriarchal gender roles in the novel is not only a personal journey for Nour, but also a collective challenge that many of the women in her community face. Halaby highlights how women who resist these roles often encounter backlash from both men and women who perpetuate the status quo. This dynamic underscores the complicated nature of gender empowerment in cultures where patriarchy is deeply ingrained. As **Chandra Talpade Mohanty** (2003) argues in her work on transnational feminism, gender roles are not universal but rather shaped by specific historical, cultural, and political contexts. She writes:

*"To understand the dynamics of gender in a global context, one must look beyond the surface of gender oppression and recognize the ways in which women's experiences are shaped by the interplay of culture, economics, and history. The experiences of empowerment for women in different parts of the world cannot be reduced to a single model" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 92).*

In Halaby's novel, both cultural resistance and the desire for individual autonomy shape the experiences of empowerment for Nour and other female characters. The tension between tradition and modernity, between the patriarchal family structure and the evolving feminist ideals of the modern world, is a central theme in the exploration of gender roles in the text. Nour's empowerment lies in her ability to negotiate these tensions and to define her identity on her own terms, rather than accepting the rigid roles imposed by society.

## **5. The Role of Family and Tradition in Shaping Women's Empowerment in *Once in a Promised Land***

In Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, the role of family and tradition is pivotal in shaping the protagonist Nour's journey toward empowerment. Nour's familial relationships, primarily with her father and her husband, represent the powerful force of patriarchal control that attempts to confine her into predetermined roles. This section explores the tension between gender roles, which are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Nour's upbringing, and her quest for autonomy in a foreign society.

From the start, Nour's father embodies the traditional patriarchal expectations of women in Arab cultures. His views reflect a conservative stance on gender roles, where a woman's place is primarily within the home, supporting her family and adhering to conventional duties as a wife and mother. His influence, which is at the core of Nour's struggle, represents a larger societal structure that seeks to suppress the potential of women by limiting their choices to domesticity and sacrifice. Nour's resistance to these expectations, however, becomes a major theme in the novel as she moves toward self-empowerment.

This battle between familial expectations and personal autonomy is explored through the feminist lens, particularly through the work of **Fatema Mernissi** (1991), who asserts that the family unit in patriarchal societies plays a crucial role in maintaining women's subordination. According to Mernissi (1991):

*"The family, which is the primary institution for socializing women, reinforces the idea that women are responsible for maintaining the emotional and social stability of the home. By assigning women the duty of care and compliance, the family ensures that women remain in a*

*subordinate, passive role. This familial structure, in turn, limits women's agency and autonomy" (Mernissi, 1991, p. 58).*

Mernissi's view on the social role of women aligns with Nour's experience in *Once in a Promised Land*, where her father's views on her role as a woman restrict her agency. Nour's internal conflict begins when she recognizes that her desires and ambitions clash with the roles prescribed by her father's worldview. This conflict highlights the broader social constraints faced by women in similar cultural contexts, which **Mernissi** argues are rooted in the structure of the family.

As the novel progresses, Nour's resistance to her father's patriarchal expectations becomes more pronounced. This is reflected in her growing awareness of her own subjectivity and the recognition that she does not have to conform to traditional gender norms. However, Nour's empowerment is not a linear process. The emotional labor and the pressure to conform to familial roles remain constant throughout her journey. The immigrant experience complicates this, as Nour is forced to navigate the intersectionality of her Arab identity and the gendered expectations imposed upon her by both her heritage and the society she now inhabits in the United States.

The intersectionality of gender and culture in *Once in a Promised Land* is further emphasized by **Simone de Beauvoir's** (1949) discussion of how women are often relegated to the status of '**the other**' in patriarchal cultures. De Beauvoir explains:

*"A woman is often not seen as a full human being, but as the reflection of the man's desires and needs. She is socialized to be subordinate, to exist only in relation to others—her father, her husband, her children. To truly empower women, they must learn to define their own identity, independent*

*of the expectations that society and family impose upon them" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 220).*

Nour's struggles are in line with de Beauvoir's analysis of women's subordination, as she is often defined by the roles she occupies within her family, rather than as an autonomous individual. Her journey toward empowerment, then, is marked by a gradual shedding of these roles and a reclaiming of her identity as a woman, rather than as a daughter or a wife.

Nour's relationship with her husband, Omar, introduces another layer to the exploration of empowerment through gender roles. Omar represents a more modern and liberal stance compared to Nour's father, yet still adheres to certain patriarchal norms within their marriage. Omar's desire to protect Nour, his expectation that she take on traditional domestic responsibilities, and his control over key decisions in their lives reflect the dynamics of power in their marriage. His authority is not as overtly oppressive as her father's, but it nonetheless limits Nour's autonomy.

In her marriage to Omar, Nour navigates the emotional labor that is often required of women, especially in immigrant households where traditional gender roles collide with the pressures of acculturation. **Arlie Russell Hochschild** (1997) offers a comprehensive analysis of emotional labor within families, particularly in immigrant communities, where women are expected to balance the preservation of their cultural heritage with the demands of a new society. She writes:

*"Immigrant women face a dual burden: They must carry the emotional load of the family's cultural identity, while also adapting to the expectations of their new home. This emotional labor often goes unnoticed but is critical in maintaining familial cohesion in the face of cultural dislocation. Women in*

*these households are expected to be the emotional anchors, holding the family together as they negotiate cultural transitions" (Hochschild, 1997, p. 132).*

Nour's experience in balancing her heritage with the pressures of American society highlights the emotional labor required of immigrant women. This internal struggle shapes her understanding of what it means to be empowered, as she begins to realize that true empowerment can only be achieved when she rejects the imposed roles of wife and mother and defines herself on her own terms.

Through these familial dynamics, Halaby presents a nuanced exploration of the complexities of empowerment and the way gender roles are both internalized and contested. Nour's journey is one of constant negotiation between familial loyalty, cultural tradition, and the desire for self-determination. By the end of the novel, Nour's empowerment is not just a rejection of her family's expectations but also a reclaiming of her own identity in the face of these competing demands.

## **6. Nour's Journey Towards Self-Realization and Gendered Empowerment in *Once in a Promised Land***

Nour's evolution throughout *Once in a Promised Land* represents a journey of self-discovery and empowerment that challenges traditional gender roles, both within the Arab cultural context and in the broader American society. This transformation involves not just a physical relocation but also an emotional and intellectual reawakening, which is intricately tied to the way gender is constructed and performed in her life. The notion of self-realization, as theorized by feminist thinkers, serves as a powerful lens through which we can understand Nour's evolving consciousness.

The novel begins with Nour grappling with the emotional weight of her cultural identity and the expectations placed upon her as a woman. Her experiences in America serve as a backdrop for her transformation as she begins to question the roles that have been imposed upon her, particularly in relation to marriage, motherhood, and identity. Early in the novel, Nour feels trapped between her cultural upbringing and the more liberal views she encounters in her new life. This tension is evident when she reflects on her struggle to find her place in a new society while still holding onto the remnants of her traditional Arab upbringing.

According to **Judith Butler** (1990), the process of self-realization involves gender performativity—the idea that gender is not something one is, but something one does. Gender roles, in this sense, are not innate but are constructed through repeated actions and behaviors. Butler’s concept of performative gender sheds light on how Nour’s gender identity is shaped not just by societal expectations but by her own performances of femininity and womanhood. As Butler (1990) states:

*"Gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. We are all in some sense always performing our gender, and in that performance, we come to define what gender is" (Butler, 1990, p. 179).*

Nour’s awareness of the performativity of gender is crucial to her journey. She comes to realize that the rigid gender roles she once internalized—those of the dutiful daughter, wife, and mother—are not fixed identities but are roles that she has learned to play. As Nour moves away from the constraints of her past, she begins to reject these roles in favor of carving out a new identity for herself, one that transcends cultural expectations and societal limitations.

However, this process is far from easy. Nour is repeatedly confronted by external forces that reinforce traditional gender norms. The pressure to conform is particularly intense in her marriage to Omar, who, despite his liberal views, still expects her to perform the role of the submissive wife. Omar's expectations are a reflection of the broader cultural pressures that shape how women are expected to behave within a patriarchal society. Nour's struggle to reconcile these expectations with her growing sense of self is a key aspect of the novel.

In this context, **bell hooks** (2000) provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of gender and empowerment. She argues that empowerment is not simply about individual agency but also involves a collective struggle to dismantle systems of oppression. As hooks (2000) states:

*"Feminism is for everybody. It is not about individual success or self-empowerment in a neoliberal sense, but about the ability to challenge and change the systems that keep people oppressed. Empowerment is collective, and it is the refusal to be complicit in the structures that perpetuate domination" (hooks, 2000, p. 5).*

Nour's journey, then, can be viewed through this feminist framework, where her personal empowerment is intertwined with a collective desire for change. Her shift from submission to self-assertion reflects not only her personal development but also her resistance to the oppressive structures that define women's roles in her culture. By the end of the novel, Nour's transformation is not just about her own empowerment; it represents a challenge to the systems of gendered oppression that she faces.

Moreover, **Chandra Talpade Mohanty** (2003) introduces the concept of transnational feminism, which is essential to understanding Nour's experience as an immigrant woman in

America. Mohanty highlights the need to critique how global systems of power impact the lives of women in different cultural and national contexts. For Mohanty (2003), gender oppression cannot be understood in isolation; it must be seen in relation to broader issues of race, class, and globalization. As Mohanty writes:

*"Transnational feminism calls for a critical interrogation of how different forms of oppression are interlinked across national borders. It demands an understanding of women's lives not just within their local contexts but as part of global structures that shape their realities" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 213).*

Nour's identity is shaped by this intersection of cultural heritage and global migration. Her position as an Arab woman in America forces her to navigate a complex web of cultural expectations, immigration pressures, and gender norms. Her eventual empowerment comes not only from her rejection of patriarchal structures within her family but also from her ability to reconcile her identity as an Arab woman in a Western society. Nour's self-realization is thus a deeply transnational experience, shaped by both local and global forces.

Through Nour's transformation, Halaby illustrates how empowerment is an ongoing process of negotiation and resistance. Empowerment, in this case, is not a destination but a journey—one that involves constant redefinition of identity, gender, and cultural belonging. Nour's final rejection of the roles imposed on her reflects a larger, collective desire for liberation and self-determination, both within her family and within the broader social context.

## **7. Butler's Gender Performativity and Nour's Evolving Identity**

Judith Butler's groundbreaking theory of gender performativity provides a vital framework for analyzing the ways in which gender identity is not an innate characteristic but

rather something that is performed through actions, behaviors, and societal norms. In her work *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that gender is not a fixed essence but a set of repeated actions, expressions, and performances that create the illusion of a stable gender identity (Butler, 1990). This performative nature of gender is crucial for understanding Nour's identity in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*. Nour's journey through self-discovery and empowerment can be analyzed through Butler's theory, especially in how she navigates, resists, and conforms to gender norms across different cultural contexts.

- **Gender as Performance: A Theoretical Framework**

Butler's theory contends that gender is an ongoing performance rather than a static category. According to Butler (1990), gender is constituted through "a stylized repetition of acts" that create the illusion of a stable identity (*Gender Trouble*, p. 191). It is produced and maintained through linguistic and social norms that dictate how bodies should appear and behave *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Nour's identity, shaped by both Arab and American cultures, exemplifies this performativity, as her behaviors shift according to the cultural codes surrounding her. Her struggle with societal expectations and her gradual empowerment reveal her awareness of gender as a performance rather than an essence. As Butler further argues in *Undoing Gender* (2004), such performances are deeply embedded in power structures that regulate which identities are recognized as legitimate.

For example, Nour's experience of assimilation into American society presents a space where she must perform gender differently. Initially, she adheres to traditional Arab roles as a daughter and wife, but over time, she begins to challenge these constraints. Her transition from a passive, subjugated role in her family to a more assertive position in her personal and professional life mirrors Butler's (1990) idea that gender is not a singular, fixed identity but rather an expression shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which it is performed.

- **Analyzing Nour's Actions as Gender Performances**

Nour's journey is marked by moments where she consciously and unconsciously performs her gender according to the expectations of her environment. These performances often conflict, creating tension in her identity. In one instance, Nour's role as a mother and wife in her traditional Arab family aligns with the performative gender roles prescribed by her culture. She is expected to fulfill certain duties, such as caring for the home and supporting her husband's career. However, in the American setting, Nour finds herself performing gender differently. For example, in her professional life, Nour asserts her autonomy and challenges the traditional expectations of femininity that were instilled in her by her family. These contrasting performances of gender in her family and workplace reflect Butler's idea that gender is a **fluid, performative act** (Butler, 1990), and Nour's identity is constantly shifting in response to her environment.

In a key scene, Nour has a conversation with Omar, where she challenges his expectations of her as a woman. Her assertiveness in this dialogue reflects Butler's notion that gender is not a fixed identity but a dynamic, evolving performance. Through her evolving actions, Nour begins to break free from the confines of traditional gender roles. Her journey towards empowerment is, therefore, an act of deconstructing the repeated performances of gender imposed upon her by her cultural background and embracing a more fluid, individualized sense of self.

- **Challenges to Gender Norms: Nour's Rebellion and Empowerment**

Nour's rebellion against the traditional gender norms of her Arab community can be seen as a key moment in her empowerment. By rejecting the passive role of a traditional wife and mother, Nour is able to carve out a new identity for herself, one that is not confined by societal expectations. Butler (1990) emphasizes that challenging the repetitive performance of

gender roles is central to breaking free from the constraints that limit women's agency. Nour's increasing assertiveness, her decision to pursue her own ambitions, and her refusal to conform to traditional gendered expectations all represent acts of gender performativity that challenge the traditional understanding of femininity and empower her to redefine her identity.

In her professional life, Nour faces additional challenges as she tries to assert her competence in a male-dominated workplace. Her interactions with colleagues reflect how gender roles are enforced through workplace dynamics, where she must navigate not only cultural expectations of gender but also institutionalized gender biases. By overcoming these challenges and asserting her voice, Nour engages in a form of gender performance that resists the dominant male-centric narratives of both her Arab upbringing and the American workplace. These performances demonstrate that gender empowerment involves a deliberate act of resistance and the choice to enact gender in ways that **are empowering and autonomous**, consistent with Butler's theory of gender as performative (Butler, 1990).

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Two has explored the intricate relationship between gender roles, empowerment, and assimilation in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, focusing primarily on Nour's evolving identity. From the beginning, it became evident that Nour's journey is marked by the tension between her traditional Arab upbringing and the demands of American society. This chapter analyzed how her actions and choices reflect the performative nature of gender identity, in line with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and how she uses this understanding to navigate her path to empowerment.

In the first section, we discussed how assimilation functions as a double-edged sword for Nour. While the desire to assimilate into American society offers a sense of possibility and freedom, it also forces her to reconcile her conflicting identities—those of a traditional Arab woman and an individual striving for autonomy. Nour's struggle with this assimilation

process highlights the psychological and emotional toll of attempting to conform to external expectations, particularly those imposed by the dominant culture. Yet, it also sets the stage for her growth and empowerment, as Nour ultimately recognizes that assimilation doesn't require the erasure of her cultural identity but rather demands a transformation in how she negotiates between these identities.

The second section delved deeper into the shifting gender roles that Nour encounters. Her relationships with family, particularly with her husband Omar, show the tension between the traditional gender roles ascribed to her in her Arab culture and the more individualistic, liberated gender expectations she faces in the American context. These contrasting gender roles are pivotal in understanding Nour's empowerment, as they expose the limitations of the roles she was expected to perform. By slowly breaking free from these constraints, Nour is able to redefine her gender identity, asserting autonomy and agency in ways that challenge the traditional roles that sought to define her.

Furthermore, Nour's journey of empowerment is deeply linked to her awareness of gender performativity, a concept explored in the final section. Drawing upon **Judith Butler's theory**, we explored how Nour's gender identity is not static but is instead **constructed through repeated performances** in response to societal norms and expectations. Nour's rejection of her traditional, passive role and her active engagement in shaping her identity reflect Butler's argument that gender is not a stable essence but a **performative act** that can be reshaped. This empowerment through the performance of gender enables Nour to take ownership of her identity and make decisions that align with her own desires, rather than conforming to the expectations of her family or society.

By examining Nour's evolving sense of self, this chapter illustrated that empowerment for women does not come from a singular, isolated act of rebellion but from a continuous

process of negotiating and performing one's identity in a way that allows for both personal freedom and cultural understanding. Nour's ability to redefine gender roles within the context of both her Arab heritage and American experience serves as a powerful example of how women can challenge societal constraints and carve out their own paths.

In conclusion, Nour's story in *Once in a Promised Land* provides a profound commentary on the complex dynamics of gender roles, identity, and empowerment. Through the lens of assimilation and the performative nature of gender, it is clear that her empowerment is not about fully rejecting her cultural background, but rather about embracing the fluidity of her identity and performing gender in ways that align with her evolving sense of self. This exploration not only enriches our understanding of gender within the context of multiculturalism but also offers a broader perspective on the empowerment of women as they challenge traditional expectations and redefine their roles in society.

## **V-General conclusion**

This dissertation has analyzed the theme of women's empowerment in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), with a particular focus on the experiences of Arab-American women post-9/11. While the concept of hybridity offers useful insights into the characters' identity struggles, this study primarily concentrates on how women, like the protagonist Salwa, navigate a multifaceted reality shaped by cultural displacement, gendered expectations, and societal scrutiny. Through the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler's *Gender Performativity* (1990) and postcolonial theory, this research illustrates how women in the novel assert agency, challenge traditional roles, and reimagine their identities in a context of resistance and self-empowerment.

In the first chapter, the focus was on Salwa's internal journey as an Arab-American woman caught between two conflicting cultural spheres. The trauma and alienation Salwa faces in the aftermath of 9/11 serve as a backdrop to her transformation. The analysis revealed that Salwa's struggle is not just one of assimilation but of resistance to imposed gender norms that attempt to define her both within her Arab heritage and the dominant American culture. Her experience challenges the notion of passive victimhood and instead highlights the active role of women in shaping their lives and identities. Salwa's evolving understanding of her cultural and gendered self is a key site of empowerment, wherein she refuses to be constrained by stereotypes and instead redefines her femininity in her own terms.

By applying Judith Butler's concept of *gender performativity*, the dissertation emphasized that gender is not a static or biological trait, but a series of performed actions that can be redefined. Salwa's journey exemplifies this idea, as she moves from a position of vulnerability and confusion to one of active self-empowerment. Her ability to challenge the

constraints imposed upon her as a woman—both by the patriarchal structures of her own cultural background and the Western hegemonic forces—demonstrates how women can exercise agency even in the face of systemic oppression. Salwa’s empowerment emerges from her ability to perform new roles, reframe her identity, and transcend limiting narratives.

In the second chapter, the dissertation expanded on the effects of the 9/11 attacks on Arab-American communities, particularly Arab-American women. The aftermath of the attacks amplified racial and cultural stereotypes, leading to increased discrimination and suspicion. This heightened climate of fear and exclusion forced many Arab-American women to reevaluate their positions within American society. However, rather than retreating or succumbing to victimhood, many of these women, including Salwa, chose to fight for their place in a world that sought to marginalize them. The chapter analyzed how these women navigated the fine line between assimilation and resistance, seeking to retain their cultural identity while engaging with mainstream American society on their own terms. This process of negotiation was not one of passive acceptance but one of active engagement, whereby these women reasserted their power and voice in a system that often tried to silence them.

Through their actions and choices, the female characters in Halaby’s novel demonstrate the transformative power of self-redefinition. These women were not only responding to external forces but were actively involved in reshaping the gender roles and expectations that had been imposed upon them. By performing their gender identities in new ways, they asserted their autonomy, empowering themselves in both personal and collective spheres. The resistance they embody is not simply against external oppression but also against the traditional, patriarchal norms that often limited their agency within their own cultural communities.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that women's empowerment in *Once in a Promised Land* goes beyond individual acts of resistance; it also emphasizes solidarity and the collective empowerment of marginalized groups. Salwa and other women in the novel find strength in community, supporting each other in their journeys of self-discovery and cultural negotiation. Their empowerment is thus not just individual but also collective, as they challenge the broader societal structures that attempt to define and confine them.

This dissertation also explored how Arab-American women, in particular, navigated the intersection of gender, culture, and race in the post-9/11 world. The novel underscores the ways in which these women resisted the binary thinking of “East” versus “West,” “traditional” versus “modern,” and instead embraced a more fluid and nuanced understanding of their identities. Salwa and her peers create new spaces where they can be both Arab and American, both women and individuals, in a way that defies the rigid categories often imposed upon them. This dynamic negotiation of identity, both cultural and gendered, reflects a larger trend within diasporic communities where empowerment arises through the blending and hybridization of different cultural influences.

In conclusion, this dissertation reaffirms that women's empowerment in *Once in a Promised Land* is deeply tied to the ability to redefine and perform one's identity in the face of external and internalized constraints. Through the application of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, it becomes evident that gender roles are not fixed but are continuously constructed and deconstructed through action. Salwa's journey of empowerment is emblematic of the broader experience of Arab-American women, who navigate the complex terrain of cultural negotiation, gendered resistance, and self-assertion. The study demonstrates that empowerment is a dynamic process that requires ongoing self-reflection, negotiation, and

resistance, and that women's agency can be a powerful tool for personal and collective transformation.

Ultimately, this dissertation concludes that women's empowerment in the context of Arab-American identity is not merely about overcoming external challenges but about actively shaping and performing new narratives of self-determination. By redefining their roles, resisting societal and cultural pressures, and reimagining their identities, Arab-American women in Halaby's novel forge pathways toward self-empowerment and resilience, contributing to the broader struggle for social justice and gender equality in a post-9/11 world.

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