Issues Related to Arab Folklore with reference to Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, a post 9/11 novel

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...by these old customs the descent of nations  
can only be proved where other monuments of writings are not remaining  

Edmund Spenser. 1595

Abstract  
This paper focuses on cultural and political perspectives that have impacted Arabic folklore and influenced transmission of folk elements. This study reviews a series of studies carried out by eminent scholars of folk literature concerning the impact of political events on national identity construction to measure how national collective memory reacts to external factors in order to maintain and recall folk elements. This strategy of maintaining national folklore and using it as a resistance strategy to the hostile post 9/11 America is employed in Laila Halaby’s novel *Once in a Promised Land* in which Halaby, an Arab immigrant, intertwines tales from Arabic folklore with narratives and use them both as cultural therapy for Arab immigrants who become exposed to racial discrimination and physical assault in America and as component of building Arab identity. This was made possible in the novel by incorporating very short folktale relevant to issues faced by Arab immigrants.

Keywords: Arab, Folklore, Folktale, Immigrants, Colonization, racism, 9/11 America.
Introduction

Spanning a huge spectrum of splendid disciplines and forms, oral literature is a part of the corpus of ancient nations' cultural magnum opus that led to the transmission of knowledge from generation to another. Folk literature contributed to the enlightenment of communities characterized by their interests in the study of their past "as a subject reflected of national events, resulting in a catalogue of local occurrence" (Hobbs. 4). This includes a significant number of contributions to literary heritage deviated from this huge folk category such as rituals, myths, legends, fairy tales, anecdotes, tales, wisdoms, legends, oral poetry...etc. According to the definition of Benjamin A. Botkin (1938), folklore "is a body of traditional beliefs, customs, and expressions, handed down largely by words of mouth and circulating chiefly outside of commercial and academic means of communication and instruction" (1). Folklore is generally differentiated from other varieties and genres of literature in being "unofficial, non-institutional" component of culture and the carrier of oral "knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs" (Brunvand. 20). However, telling stories of cultures is the common activity of all genres of literature including folk forms with varying degrees of complexity. Oral story telling continues to be a vital entity in the literary body and an important national contribution in building national culture and identity. It serves as a spring of nationalism and a cultural circulation machine for preservation of traditions from external threats such as political and cultural hegemony, colonialism, and cultural influences.

Folk literature in its broader sense is a universal activity that has common cultural features shared by societies. Cultural studies and comparative studies have shown similarities of contents and functions of these genres. Lester Julius who studied the relationships between cultures notes that “each person who tells a story moulds the story to his tongue and to his mouth, and each listener moulds the story to his ear” (viii). Folk elements tend to play a similar role in different societies to "give people a way of communicating with each other about each other-their fears, their hopes, their dreams, their fantasies, giving their explanations of why the world is the way it is" (vii). In Folklore and Anthropology published in 1953 by William Bascom, who was eminent scholar of cultural studies and a specialist in African cultures, especially the Yoruba culture, discussed the role played by folklore literature. According to him folk elements do not only serve to sanction and validate religious, social, political, and economic institutions but also play an important role as an educative device in their transmission from one generation to another (284). In his later and famous research titled Four Functions of Folklore (1954), Bascom summarizes four functions of folklore, that are, amusement, validating culture, education and maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behaviour (339). Shaped through centuries of accumulation of human experience and interactions, folk heritage is purified and refined through the transmitting process of the needed elements in which new generations find what suit their lives.

In August 1846, William John Thoms, a British antiquarian and one of the earliest scholars to investigate this area as a part of literature, gave the name Folklore to this antiquarian area of study which had been challenging and subject for definition and redefinition for long time. When world scholars were busy investigating this area of literature,
though not under this name, and trying to categorize it, several names were given to it such as "popular antiquities", "popular literature", "oral sayings", "oral traditions"…etc. yet none of the efforts resulted in a fixed and solidified term for folklore. However, it was William Thomas who gave the term folklore to this genre that acquired popularity and became an independent genre. Though Thoms was mainly a government clerk in Chelsea hospital and later a Deputy Librarian at the House of lords he started investigating old tales, prose romances, customs and superstitions at his free time from what he called "onerous official duties". He gained distinguished fame in an area that was new to him when he scribbled 'Folklore' on his photograph that he gave to his friend G. L. Gomme the following lines in 1846:

If you would fain know more
Of him whose Photo here is-
He coined the word Folk-Lore
And started Notes & Queries (Dundes. 10)

Theorizing Early Modern Arab Folk Heritage

Arab speaking countries are a rich basket of folk elements and a hot spot of diverse heritage and cultures where several tribes and clans lived with distinguished dialects and beliefs and left huge fortune of folk heritage. Arabic folk heritage represents, with all its myriad manifestations, a cultural capital that can be mobilized as a means of enhancing prosperity and an important contribution to the on-going social developments in the region (Serageldin. i). Arabia, like major world nations of India, China, Greece etc... has its own vastness of national folklore that people maintained, transmitted and kept alive. Arabia has been a place of birth of world major religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam and therefore, many of traditions and beliefs were the focus of these religions. This paper attempts to demonstrate the cultural approach to folklore by an Arab immigrant writer, Laila Halaby, who uses folkloric elements as a cultural therapy and a means of resistance to racism in the biased white American society after 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington:

Migrant stories are worth telling and worth hearing. Their narratives create a sense of history, a sense of the past, and construct a framework within which future generations can orient themselves. An understanding of the past helps individuals to locate themselves within history and culture, whence they can construct a self-identity narrative that connects the past to the present (Yekenkurul. 54).

The cultural and political context of the Arab countries under colonization is deemed to be essential for any serious discussion of any aspect of Arab heritage. In this study I consider the Western colonization of the Arab world a turning point in the history of Arab folk heritage and a concrete wall that isolated the folklore from people and appropriated it in a mainstream that helps dominance and hegemony over the region. Therefore, colonization caused numerous downfalls to Arab folk heritage whose authentic oral forms were subject to negligence and the influence of the European cultures. Several folkloric elements disappeared,
magic ended and several elements of supernatural have declined from discussions and became redundant among tribal talks. These political realities imposed on Arabia weakened the ties between common man and his folkloric heritage:

The colonizers lumped together the inhabitants of the region in the Ottoman basket and negated them from history creating the phantasm of a civilization that links pre-Islamic civilizations like Persia, ancient Egypt and “Mesopotamia” with Greece and Rome, which they regarded as their immediate ancestors. (Hassan & Mohsen. 5).

Another likely reason for the decline of folk elements among modern generation has been the tendency among Arab writers to concentrate almost exclusively on modern issues forgetting or failing to adopt folkloric ingredients. Sayyid Hurreiz notices that common man as well as scholars in Arab region “have been so shocked by international events” and “have not found themselves able to speak about Arabic heroism with ease-even if of bygone times” (362). However, the Arab world elites began to identify themselves with whatever is European and regarded sticking to indigenous heritage and participating in it as backward. The notion of the role of heritage in the making of Arab identity has been deformed by the political context that introduced the Western culture in a superior manner as universal cultural phenomenon that leads to developing and enlightening nations. However, this political and military hegemony led to cultural dominance that resonated among Arab elites and swayed common man away from the backbone of his region.

Folklore in post 9/11 Arab American Narrative

Arabic folk heritage, however, has prospered in the communities of the immigrants and become manifest in the new social setting and adaptable writings on racism and marginalization: “[I]mmigrants combat identity-related confusion, starting with the perplexing problem of labelling and being labelled and continuing with the process of transformation from an immigrant to an ethnic to a member of an ethnic group” (McCarus. 19). Insertion of elements such as deities, spirits, ghosts, witches and other agents of the supernatural in narrative texts is more actively present in the daily talks and writings of Arab immigrants than at their home countries: “immigrant groups may keep alive mythologies and histories tied to landscapes in the old country, evoking them through architecture, music, dance, ritual, and craft” (Bronner. 241). Though Arab immigrants, as a cultural group, are far away from their native countries, they keep alive cultural heritage provided by memories of their homeland or transmitted through grandmothers to descendants. For example, this heritage is invested in post 9/11 Arab American writings when Arab immigrants become exposed to hatred, discrimination, physical assaults and rampant racist acts after 9/11 terrorist attacks. This style of writing keeps folk elements tied to common issues shared by all Arab immigrants:

At the turn of the century the concept of the melting pot became current, whereby it was believed that Anglo-Saxon conformity was the ideal goal, and that all minorities would be assimilated into it so producing a homogeneous new race. But in fact, the newcomers were rejected by mainstream society. ...the minority culture takes on select aspects of the majority culture but retains its own identity (McCarus. 2).
Arabic folklore is part and parcel of Laila Halaby’s narrative work *Once in a Promised Land* where she weaves folktales in order to give her narrative a true touch of beauty and glamour, something Arabian and very close to the hearts of the immigrants. The term “Arab Americans” refers to Arabs and their descendants who have migrated from the Middle East to the United States from the 1880s till the present time. Though these writers have migrated to the United States from different societies of the Middle East particularly Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, carrying with them different religious and spiritual heritages, yet they “staked out an individual space from which they explore their own relations to identity, culture, religion, and the building or inhabiting of a life in the United States” and tried “to bridge Eastern and Western philosophy, thought, and religion” (Layton. 7-13). With the start of the twenty-first Century, the subject matter in Arab American literature takes a change to meet anti-Arab racism in the U.S. that increased significantly by the 9/11 attacks on the U.S and fuelled by U.S. military involvement in the Middle East. Therefore, themes of self-assertion, devotion to Arab culture, Arab community unity, displacement, discrimination and racism against Arabs and Muslims dominate the majority of texts written during the period from 2001 to 2009.

Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) is the story of an Arab couple, Jassim and Salwa, who leaves the deserts of their native Jordan for those of Arizona in the turbulent days following 9/11 to fulfil their quintessential dreams. Yet their life becomes the focus of the FBI investigation and they begin to experience a longing for their homeland. Although the two live far from Ground Zero, they cannot escape the racial discrimination of the citizens and the FBI agents. This cultural antipathy towards the Arabs and Islam is manifest in many white American writings that reinforce evil representations and encourage discrimination. *Once in a Promised Land* offers an instructive insight into the struggles facing Arab Americans in post 9/11 America.

Halaby opens her novel by referring to very common opening lines from Arabic folklore “*Kan ya ma kan fi kadeem az-zaman,*” which she literally translates as “*They say there was or there wasn’t in olden times.*” This folk opening is the spark of proliferating the nationalist themes that are immensely highlighted in the novel through inserting tales from Arabic folk tradition. Early in the novel, Halaby narrates a traditional story about a *ghula* (an evil female figure from Arabic folklore, a similar character to hag in Western folk tales) who entices children to play with her and eats them up when they become in her grip. In this episode, only a very clever poor boy named Nus Nsays manages to defeat the *ghula* by his patience and tricks. He escaped her clutches and determined to catch her: “The villagers were pleased by his cunning and bravery. He said to them, “What would you think if I brought you the *ghula*?” *I will bring her. I will catch her for you.*” (Halaby. 97). Though *ghula* tried to tempt the boy using all kinds of offers: “*I’ll give you all my gold and silver and money,*” he denied and asserted: “I don’t want gold or silver or money. I want peace for my village,” (97). The boy's determination to defeat the *ghula* in *Once in a Promised Land* bridges the boundaries between the immigrants' history and memory. This gap is an obsessing feature of Halay's novel, where the boundaries between history and memories of immigrants' life in Arabia haunt the protagonists. This determination represents the interaction of the past and the present of the immigrants whose memories, fictional or real, of the Palestinian suffering.
determine the future of these immigrants who struggle to overcome the rampant racism and discrimination against them in America after 9/11.

*Once in A Promised Land* is replete with legends common among Palestinian, Jordanian and Lebanese people. One function of the folk tradition in Halaby's novel is to establish a solid background for her story "that shapes and constructs the narrative (Riessman, 140). The vestiges of social practices, marital rituals, unspoken beliefs, values and etc. in these legends have been part of the social life in their societies and a constituent of identity. Immigrant identity which is targeted by recalling folktales in this text is built on historical experiences and watershed events shared by the immigrant community. Senem Yekenkurul notes that "[i]dentity is constructed through narrative memory. Remembering the past connects us to history, and that remembering forms a tradition" (55). And, this added element to identity helps immigrants "recall a life story is to remember the dialogical and inter-subjective other; the people, the places, the time of day, the weather, the smells; it is to encapsulate the embodied experience" (55). Nus Nsays' tale introduces the reader to the boy's incomparable strength that "[e]ven though he was so tiny, his shadow was tall, tall, taller than all of their shadows. He got on his goat and rode back to his mother." (98). He defeated a wild creature and gained the respect of the village: “When the villagers saw that NUs Nsays had captured the ghula, they looked at him with surprise. He was standing across from them, and the sun shone on him with his shadow behind him” (98). His internal identity component is more important here than his physical shape because it functions both to reflect the past and to create an identity.

Instead of using multiple narrative techniques, Halaby uses one narrative technique with purpose for introducing all episodes and viewing the roles performed by characters. She employed an Arabic narrative technique to stress on certain principles and values. For instance, Halaby introduces the reader to the legend of *Pregnancy Apples* that resulted in the birth story of Nus Nsays using the same narrative technique that starts with the same Arab folkloric opening lines:

*Kan ya ma kan fee qadeem az-zamaan... there was or there wasn’t in olden times...a woman who could not get pregnant. Years passed, and her yearning for a baby grew and grew. One day as she was working in her house, she heard a merchant’s cry through her window; “Pregnant apples from the mountain! Pregnancy apples from the mountain!” She said to herself, could there really be an apple for getting pregnant? (93).*

These short openings or "semi-prologues" usually differentiate oral literature from formal literature. Gail de Vos, a specialist in contemporary story-telling technique, contends that "[t]he opening, often consisting of a brief anecdote that makes the story relevant to the audience or an explanation of something within the tale that the listener needs to know in order to appreciate or understand it better, creates the transition from the world of the listener into the world of the story" (4-5). Raphael Patai notes that the function of the introductions and openings in folktales is to introduce the reader to the major characters, the setting and the problem of the story in a way “associated with the traditions that the immigrants brought with them” (177). Focusing on the folktales used by immigrants, transmission of folk practices and
the survival of folk heritage in their communities, Will Eisner, a prominent American writer, writes in the prologue to his story Street Magic that:

[i]mmigrant families on our block believed they were in hostile territory. Survival skills were brought from the old country. They were kept as magic spells the family used when dealing with the predictable outrages of neighbourhood life. They were not formally taught. They were learned by emulating older and more experienced family members. (19)

The "ethnic tale" of Pregnancy Apple is first heard by Salwa from her grandmother in Jordan and becomes a memorable tale for her inside the United States. It is a story of the woman who does not get pregnant and has to eat a certain kind of apple called pregnancy apple to get pregnant. This tale is retold by Salwa when her life "gets worse" and "had very difficult periods" (Halaby. 92). The story is sandwiched between different chapters of the novel, where Nus Nsays was born, lived and defeated the ghula. The poor lady was determined to have a baby and “bought a large red apple and took it home" and however instead of eating it "her husband came in from the fields and, seeing the apple on the counter, bit into it once, twice, then three times, giant bites that consumed half the apple" (93). Therefore, the mother gave birth to a boy who remains very tiny:

…because she had eaten only half, the boy she gave birth to was very tiny, so tiny that people called him Nus Nsays (which in Arabic means half of a halving).” “In spite of his size, his mother was overjoyed. Nus Nsays grew (children in tales always grow quickly), but he remained the size of a very young boy. His hands were tiny, his legs were short, but his voice was loud and strong like the voices of all the other children.” (93)

The simple tale of Nus Nsays sets the paradigm of major issues related to the lives of Arab immigrants who "rely on the folklore genres and the set of concepts and symbols derived from their original homes to cope with their new environment" (Patai. 177). The birth of this little boy and his struggle in the novel explain the fact about what is like to be an Arab Muslim in post 9/11 America. Further, the struggle of "tiny boy" through the whole scenes has been the paradigmatic of the massive strength and endurance characterizing Arab immigrants. Contrary to Nus Nsays, the ghula who continues to be present till the end of the novel represents unfulfilled promises, stunted potential, immigrants’ fascination with consumerism and vulnerability to racism and assaults: "The hairy hideous ghula saw the beauty in child’s face and grew madly jealous…[w]hen the ghula thought the girl would be grown and ripe for eating, she began to reel in the remaining threads, pulling the girl away from her familiar world" (Halaby. 331-332). Ghula lures innocent people and eat them up once they are in her clutches. Only the clever people like Nus Nsays can escape this trap. These arts of storytelling, according to Yekenkurul, "function as a didactic lesson in regards to a particular act" (56) and in doing so, Halaby has successfully introduced America as a conspiratorial, xenophobic and intolerant environment for Arab immigrants.

Narration in Once in a Promised Land connects Salwa, the heroine, to history and place where she lived the origin of folktale in her childhood: "[w]hen Salwa was a child, she always asked her grandmother for the meaning behind the stories" and raised question about the reality of Nus Nsays to which she got an answer: " It is just a story" (98). The grandmother's
answers to Salwa's questions are full of optimism and hope. When Salwa asks about Nus Nsays: "But what is the point of him being so small?", the answer of grandmother emphasizes the importance of internal qualities of the person: "with determination and a clever wit, small character can defeat large evils (98). The second answer to Salwa's question has relevance to the Palestinian heroism at home as well as abroad that "[e]very Palestinian has a habit of Nus Nsays within him. Or her." (98). And, the ghula, who tempts innocent people and eat them, can refer to the American Dream that lures people and traps them once they are in America especially after the rise of terror issue. However, only clever immigrants can overcome difficulties. Narration tends to end when Salwa falls a victim of American Dream and is beaten by her American bank co-worker. Jassim, her husband, who is a scientist and works hard to save rainwater for all Americans, is suspected and his work contract is terminated. Therefore, blending folktales in Once in a Promised Land reflects the author's perception of the richness of her history and awareness in making cultural heritage relevant to the modern issues related to the community of the immigrants.

Identity is constructed through narrative memories, conversation and social interaction. Of course, narrative can function as an analogy between fictional and imaginary incidents from folk heritage and real events. In other words, in narratives, reality can become fiction and vice versa. Halaby, for example, uses folk narratives and events to explain how story can recall human experience and memories. Addressing issues related to Arab community in America through folktales, Halaby contributes to the maturation of this art which deals with complexities of 9/11 and their consequences on Arab community. This dual function of narrative is a personal corrective and accumulated storage of the years which are recalled when a person gets involved in similar experiences at any geographic location.
References


