

The Ecology of Biopower: Exploring the Roots of Structural Violence in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007)

Ms. Rubab Raza ¹

Prof. Dr. Samina Amin Qadir ² Prof. Dr. Shaheena Ayub Bhatti

ABSTRACT

*Biopower (biopouvoir: French) is a term coined by the French scholar and social theorist, Michel Foucault. According to Foucault (1998), "Biopower relates to the practice of modern nation states and their regulation of their subjects through an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations" (The History of Sexuality, 140). This study aims to dissect the roots of post 9/11 structural violence, faced by Halaby's Arab-American characters in the U.S. as a tool deployed by the state institutions and society in general to exercise the biopower in order to control the migrant Mazlhem population. The term, structural violence, was coined by a Norwegian sociologist, Johan Galtung. According to Galtung, (1969) "Structural violence is a form of violence wherein some social structure or social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs" (p. 167). Thus this research adopts a Qualitative research methodology to locate the incidents of structural violence opted by the state institutions to implement their biopower as an agent to promote "environmental injustice" among the social-outcast or spatial others of the novel. Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) narrates the story of a Jordian couple whose bubble of American Dream and individual freedom shatters soon after the incident of 9/11 when the state holds them as a threat to its national security. The social ecology of the selected text has been analyzed under the principles of biopower proposed by Foucault. The study attempts to explore the sustainable breakthroughs offered by Halaby to eliminate the spatial otherness of Arabs within the Western society, required for the existence of an ecocentric and biophilic ecosystem. This research also*

¹ Ph.D. English Literature Scholar, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, Commonwealth Split-Site PhD Scholar

² Department of English, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan

highlights the novel's contribution in peace building and positive globalization and discouraging the practices of cultural conflicts and social outcast.

Kew words: *Biopower. Structural Violence. Spatial others. Social outcast. Biophilic ecosystem.*

INTRODUCTION

An esteemed French scholar and social theorist, Michel Foucault, first used the term “Biopower” in his lecture courses at the Collège de France and the term first appeared in print in *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault’s first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1998). According to Foucault, “It relates to the practice of modern nation states and their regulation of their subjects through an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (p. 140). Foucault elaborates the concept of biopower further in his lecture courses titled “Security, Territory, Population” delivered at the Collège de France between January and April 1978. He argues:

By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is what I have called biopower. (p. 1)

G. Arnason in his book, *Foucault and the Human Subject of Science* (2018) explains the mechanics of biopower and biopolitics as illustrated by Foucault and states, “According to Foucault, power is the sovereign’s right to rule... [And] Gradually the sovereign’s right to take life or let live, symbolized by the sword, was transformed into society’s power to manage life, both by caring for the life of people and by limiting it, even to the point of terminating life” (p. 7). In Arnason’s view via explaining the power dynamics of a sovereign or a society “Foucault (has) examined the history of exclusion in early modern and modern eras and provided a new understanding of the development of the modern institutions of the Western world” (p.9). Hence depicting the techniques involved in attributing any community with “spatial others”.

With reference to Foucault's concept of biopower, the rise of structural violence can be considered as one of the major byproducts of biopolitics. The term structural violence was coined by a Norwegian sociologist, Johan Galtung, in his 1969 article "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research". According to Galtung, "Structural violence is a form of violence wherein some social structure or social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs" (p. 167). Thus the methodology of structural violence can be opted by the state institutions of mostly capitalist societies to exercise their conception of biopower and acting as the agents to promote "environmental injustice". This practice can also be observed in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) where the Arab protagonists become the victim of communal prejudice as a form of structural violence in the post 9/11 American society.

Halaby's novel discusses the sacrifices demanded by the American state institutions from the Arab migrant society in the name of fulfilling their American Dream. In *The Sources of Social Power* (1986), Michael Mann's arguments reflect the hollowness of the promises made by the "American Dream". Mann states that "within state formation, increased organizational power is a trade-off, whereby the individual obtains more security and food in exchange for his or her freedom" (p. 10). Thus the bubble of individual freedom of the Arab-American characters shatters soon after the incident of 9/11 when the state holds them as a threat to its national security.

The symbolic significance of water and Jassin's profession as a hydrologist in the novel can be viewed in the light of Danielle Haque's 2019 article, "Water Occupation and the Ecology of Arab American Literature". The article provides an eco-critical perspective of the Arab literature. Haque professes the concept of "Deep Ecology" and argues, "The relationship between humans and the biosphere is an essential component of human relationships with one another" (p.65). While highlighting the significance of water in the Arab world and the persistent reference to the water bodies in the Arab-American literature he asserts:

Water links global communities literally, through shared oceans and waterways, but also through the unequal burden of pollution and rising seas on the global South that is a direct result of settler colonialism and globalization. Arab American literature has significant and often overlooked contributions to make to ecological aesthetics and praxis, and to environmental justice. (p. 67)

Haque reviews the symbiotic role of biotic and abiotic factors and proclaims the significance of “unity of earthly substance” in the ecology of *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) when he comments:

The text depicts human relationships to the biosphere and how they oppose national frameworks defining what land (and water) is and how we should relate to it. Within its pages, the planet is not merely the setting in which human histories play out, but the world and all of its nonhuman actors interact with humans and are simultaneously impacted by human practices. (p. 70)

A similar “sense of planet” is reflected in the words of Jassim when he says, “Water is life, technology, is power... Since the beginning of time, water has been of such fundamental importance that flaunting one’s ownership of it in wasteful fountains became synonymous with wealth. This was as true in Phoenicia as it is now in Phoenix” (Halaby, 245).

Besides Haque Marta Cariello in “Crossing the Desert: The Mediterranean Hinterland from Jordan to America in Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*” also draws the connection between the characters of the novel and their physical environment and highlights Halaby’s stress on “the uses and the abuses of water—especially as articulated through Jassim’s occupation as a hydrologist—the inadequacy of national borders and nation-states in the face of environmental issues and ecocriticism, taking the desert across continents and oceans, to narrate a critical territory of common need, and uneven uses” (p. 384).

Some of the concerns of the second wave of ecocriticism; “environmental injustice” and “spatial others”, have also been highlighted by Carol Fadda-Conrey in his article, “Arab American Citizenship in Crisis: Destabilizing Representations of Arabs and Muslims in the United States after 9/11”. The article suggests the roots of structural violence faced by the Arab-Americans in the abuse of biopower by the state institutions. Fadda-Conrey establishes the cultural hegemony of the capitalist America with the help of the folk lore of Jordan narrated by Halaby. He claims:

Halaby more than once summons mythological creatures of the Arab culture: the *ghula* (Arabic for female monster, or sorceress) who, in the end, symbolizes America that tricks immigrants and their children into believing in the American dream... in contrast to *Nus Nsays* (“half of halving” in Arabic), who, despite his

very small size, escapes the *ghula* thanks to his cleverness... [Unfortunately] Salwa has lost the Nus Nsays in her, succumbing to the destructive lures of ghula/America. (p. 208)

Fadda-Conrey quotes an example of “spatial injustice” and “cultural conflict” faced by the Arab-Americans even before the 9/11 incident only to be heightened systematically later by the death of the American citizens in the hands of the Arab terrorists. He narrates that:

Arab and Muslim Americans’ cultural citizenship has been continuously undermined since the late 1960s... [And] after 9/11, state and federal laws have systematically stripped Arab-Americans (as well as Muslim-Americans and other racialized minorities) of their citizen rights, if not their legal citizenship altogether. (p. 205)

Jassim’s words also echo such an “ecological violence” and cultural prejudice when he argues to the FBI agents: “I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab” (Halaby, 232).

The concept and practice of “spatial otherness” has also been criticized by Edward Said in *Covering Islam: how the Media and the Experts Determine how We See the Rest of the World* (1981). He asserts:

[S]uch locales, regions, geographical sectors as “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has given reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other. (p. 5)

The famous statement made by President Bush in his address to a joint session of Congress and the nation on September 20 2001, perhaps most effectively captures the “binary thinking” that dominated the post-9/11 political discourse of the United States of America. According to the press release by The White House, President George W. Bush on September 20, 2001, famously put forward a global agenda that, “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists” (n.pag). With reference to this stance taken by the president, Lea Espinoza Garrido asserts in an article, “Porous Borders, Porous Bodies – Citizenship, Gender and States of Exception in Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*” (2021)

that, “Adopting this “us vs. them” rhetoric, the Bush administration and the corporate media constructed the image of an Arab, Muslim enemy which threatened the freedom of the West and thus deserved to be disciplined and punished” (p. 176). This binary thinking is also reflected when Joan, Salwa’s coworker, gives Salwa an American flag and tells her, “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, 55).

In her 2012 thesis titled, “Reverse Orientalism: Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*” submitted for Master of Arts in English at the Cleveland State University, Amanda Lloyd establishes that:

Halaby inverts the Western gaze upon the Arab world; in doing so, she represents an America that is conspiratorial and inundated with religious zealotry... Halaby, then, portrays intolerant and xenophobic American characters overwrought with suspicion and paranoia and reveals a post 9/11 America that is rife with anti-Arab racism. Halaby also suggests that the pervasive American perception of a world distinctly divided between East and West only exacerbates global crises such as drought, poverty, and war... Moreover, Halaby proffers a perspective of Americans as ignorantly perceiving the United States as isolated from crises threatening all nations... Her novel functions as a cautionary tale—instructing Americans to transcend a binary frame of reference in order to avoid further crises from escalating either within or beyond American borders. (p. 9)

Lloyd observes that “After the attacks, Jassim becomes the focus of an unsubstantiated FBI investigation, and Salwa begins to experience longing for her homeland, feeling ostracized by the citizens of the country in which she was born” (p. 121). Lloyd’s observation holds the protagonists of the novel the victims of a systemic structural violence and she asserts, “Halaby’s Arab American characters become increasingly aware that many Americans have adopted the oppositional discourse propagated by the rhetoric of U.S. politicians at the onset of the war on terror” (p.122). Taking a dig on western fanaticism Lloyd comments on Halaby’s attempt to “expose Western extremism, offering an indictment of American society as rife with conspiracy and religious fundamentalism” (p.123).

The consequences of this “ecological injustice” become visible when Salwa says, “We cannot live here anymore...it is different now” (p.54). And later a secretary from the same company where Jassim works, reports against him to the FBI as “a suspicious rich Arab with access to the city’s water supply” (p. 271). Thus the biopower of the institutions and society work in collaboration to inflict environmental injustice and structural violence upon the social-outcast or spatial others characters of the novel.

Lloyd highlights “Halaby focus on the growing global water shortage, concentrating on regions in the Middle East (where her protagonists were raised) and the southwestern United States (where her novel is set)” (p. 124). Hence Lloyd suggests that the underline message of the novel advocates the notion of “Holism”. She says, “Halaby’s implication that the potential for global disasters unites all global citizens in a common fate is reminiscent of Silko’s warning that the possibility of nuclear annihilation affects all cultures regardless of location” (p. 140). Therefore in the negation of American “egocentric” concept of “negative globalism”, Lloyd opines that “the author oppose(s) separation and instead encourage(s) cooperation, putting forward that it is essential for all civilizations to transcend national borders and cultural partitions in order to solve global crises” (p. 141).

Mudasir Altaf Bhat, a research scholar at the department of English, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab (India) in his 2014 article, “Broken Promises in a Promised Land: Race and Citizenship after 9/11 in Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*” comments upon the cultural and ethnic background of the central characters as the reason behind them being the victim of structural violence and says,

Their Arab, Muslim background seems to automatically render them suspect in the eyes of people around them. As they increasingly become the objects of distrust, fear and bigotry, the couple is forced to confront the futility of their material successes and the hollowness at the heart of their American dream... They are branded as outcasts and foreigners because of their ethnic origin. (p. 107)

Bhat infers that “the point Halaby makes is that after September 11, Arab Americans have fallen one step behind other social outsiders, being branded not only as outsiders but also as enemy within” (p. 109) thus, rendering them the position of social outcast. One such incident is narrated

by Halaby when Salwa says to the store sales-girl, Amber: “Are you planning to have every Arab arrested now?” Do you not use your brains? This country has more than fifty million people in it, and you’re worried about your tacky little store. But now you’ll have a lot to talk about in school. You can say you saw a real live Arab and had to call security on him” (p. 30).

Louise Cainkar in *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11* (2009) quotes an example of structural violence faced by Arabs in the U.S. where

Special registration (was) applied to citizens and nationals of the following countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Eritrea, Lebanon, Morocco, North Korea, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Indonesia...those matching the criteria were ordered to register with specified INS offices in four rounds between November 15, 2002 and March 28, 2003. To publicize the call-in program, the INS distributed flyers with “THIS NOTICE IS FOR YOU” splayed across the top. (p. 133)

Caniker records that, “Many human rights advocacy groups decried special registration as racial profiling, the proliferation of which has been one of the most troubling consequences of the “War on Terror” for Arabs and Muslims in the U.S” (p.136).

Zaydun Ali Al-Shara, from University of Jordan, in his article, “Stereotypes and Paranoia in America Post 9/11 in Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*” makes a statement on America’s so-called “War Against Fear” as a cover to launch structural violence against the migrant Arabs and asserts,

The American excessive sense of paranoia following the 9/11 disaster has created an unjustified fear and hatred towards Arabs and Muslims who play important roles in the American society. This has increased the number of Arab writers who have taken on the responsibility of representing a positive image of Arabs by expressing their desire to live in peace and harmony with the rest of the world. (p. 132)

The same desire of a peaceful co-existence without being considered as a threat to the social sphere of the state is voiced out by Jassim when he states:

Means is one thing, motive is another. I am a scientist. I work to make water safe and available. I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab. Yes, I have access to the city's water supply, but I have no desire to abuse it. The mere fact that I am an Arab should not add suspicion to the matter... I have spent my entire life trying to find ways to make water safe and accessible for everyone. Just because I am an Arab, because I was raised a Muslim, you want to believe that I am capable of doing evil. It is sometimes best to look within before casting such a broad net. (p. 232)

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the narrative ecology of Halaby's novel offers a wide horizon to explore the deep-rooted causes of structural violence faced by the migrant Arabs in the Capitalist American society and the abuse of biopower by the state institutions and the society in general to promote environment injustice and social otherness. The sustainable breakthroughs offered by Halaby are pointed out by Anastasia Valassopoulos in "Negotiating un-belonging in Arab-American writing: Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*". The article brings forth the positive aspects of "globalism" as depicted by Halaby in the novel and claims, "Alongside urgently expressing strong anti-essentialist viewpoints about Arab-American identities, Halaby's novel also confounds the expectation that there is always an empowering and nurturing ethno-national community standing offstage, ready to welcome the wayward migrant" (p. 596). Valassopoulos focuses on the sustainable solutions to the "cultural crisis" faced by the Arabs in the Western societies and argues that "the post-9/11 moment requires the complete rethinking of national and personal allegiances: allegiances that show themselves to be malleable and flexible in the context of radical political change" (p.607). Hence as per the suggestions made by Valassopoulos instead of a fanatic, destructive or self-centered notion of the capitalist states, a global effort should be made towards the preservation of natural ecosystem and to view the entire ecological unit with a sense of planet based upon tolerance and all-inclusive approach. Only the practiced notions of environmental justice and integrity can make the existence of an ecocentric and biophilic society possible in contrast to the prevalent extremist and self-centered states.

REFERENCES

Al-Shara, Zaydun Ali. "Stereotypes and Paranoia in America Post 9/11 in Laila Halaby's *Once*

International Journal of Pukhtunkhwa

Volume 10 | Issue I | January – June 2025

Website: <https://pukhtunkhwajournal.org> | Email: info@pukhtunkhwajournal.com

- in a Promised Land”. *Dirasat, Human and Social Sciences*, Volume 47, No. 3, 2020
- Arnason, Garoar. Foucault and the Human Subject of Science. *SpringerBriefs in Ethics (BRIEFSETHIC)*. 2018.
- Bhat, Mudasir Altaf. “Broken Promises in a Promised Land: Race and Citizenship after 9/11 in Laila Halaby’ Once in a Promised Land”. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* ISSN: 2321-8819 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 7, July 2014. 106-116
- Cainkar, Louise. *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009. Print.
- Cariello, Marta. “Crossing the Desert: The Mediterranean Hinterland from Jordan to America in Laila Halaby’s Once in a Promised Land”. *CALIBAN*. 58, 5. 2017. p. 373-384.
- Fadda-Conrey, Carol. “Arab American Citizenship in Crisis: Destabilizing Representations of Arabs and Muslims in the United States after 9/11”, *Narrating 9/11: Fantasies of State, Security and Terrorism*. Eds. Duval, John N. and Marzec, Robert P. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Éditions Gallimard. Vol. 1. 1976.
- The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge. London: Penguin. 1998.
- Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978 pp. notes: 1–4. 2007.
- Society Must Be Defended Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976 p. 243. 2003.
- Galtung, Johan. “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”. *Journal of Peace Research*. 6 (3): 167–191. 1969.
- Garrido, Lea Espinoza. “Porous Borders, Porous Bodies – Citizenship, Gender and States of Exception in Laila Halaby’s Once in a Promised Land”, *Parallax*, 27:2. 2021. P. 176-197.

Halaby, Laila. *Once in a Promised Land*. Boston: Beacon Press. 2007. Print.

Haque, Danielle. Water Occupation and the Ecology of Arab American Literature, *MELUS*,

Volume 44, Issue 1, Spring 2019, Pages 65–86, <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mly064>.

Lloyd, Amanda, “Reverse Orientalism: Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land*”. *ETD Archive*.

2012. 529. <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive/529>

Mann, Michael. *The Sources of Social Power*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1986. Print.

Said, Edward. *Covering Islam: how the Media and the Experts Determine how We See the Rest*

of the World. New York: Vintage Books. 1981. Print.

Valassopoulos, Anastasia. “Negotiating un-belonging in Arab-American writing: Laila Halaby’s

Once in a Promised Land”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50:5, 596-608. 2014.

