Lauren Saloio

Professor Naous

ENG 362

08 December 2022

The Role Storytelling Plays in Countering Fixed Written Accounts & Creating Cross-Cultural Understandings in *The Moor's Account* & *Once in a Promised Land*

In both *The Moor's Account* and *Once in a Promised Land*, the authors rely on stories and the agency of the storyteller to counteract and reinscribe stereotypes and dominant representations of Arabs, Muslims, and other minority and colonized groups. Through the role of oral storytelling in these novels, Laila Lalami and Laila Halaby voice the culture and history of these groups of people, maintaining a part of their identity amidst all parts of themselves that they have lost. Both *The Moor's Account* and *Once in a Promised Land* are framed as the characters' life stories as if giving a voice to their identities after they are both taken away and misconstrued by the dominating stories about them. The presence and encouragement of storytelling within the characters' lives alongside a novelistic narrative creates cross-cultural possibilities and overlaps by revealing truths that fixed written accounts often leave out or misconstrue, and ultimately provide the ability to shed light on the entirety of history rather than the single story that is told by the dominating side.

After the tragic events of 9/11, the American agenda narrative shifted towards self-protection, constructing a new narrative for Muslim identity. In "The Rise of Fundamentalist Narratives - a Post-9/11 Legacy? Toward Understanding American Fundamentalist Discourse"

Mubarak Altwaiji states that “post-9/11 narrative construction of the Muslim identity as a ‘racial entity’ is a product of the interaction between power, religion and knowledge,” resulting in “a fundamentalist narrative has been developed due to the interactions of colonial agendas, hegemonic knowledge, the American values and the Christian beliefs” (Altwaiji 3). These narratives manifest outside of written narratives and become a detrimental reality for Arab Americans, especially when fixed narrative accounts encourage dichotomies between Arab Americans and other citizens of America rather than inspiring a nuanced understanding of all groups of people in the country. To challenge these narratives, authors must continue to write counternarratives that explore and deconstruct the dichotomies, instead illuminating the importance of continuing these counternarratives through the involvement of storytelling.

Both *The Moor’s Account* and *Once in a Promised Land* begin similarly, with the narrators directly addressing readers, calling attention to prejudices, and unsilencing the voices of Arabs, Muslims, and all other minority and colonized groups of people. In *The Moor’s Account*, Mustafa states that he intends “to correct the details of the history that was compiled by my companions” since “in the accordance with the standards set by their positions, they were led to omit certain events while exaggerating others, and to suppress some details while inventing others, whereas I .. feel free to recount the true story of what happened to my companions and me” (Lalami 3). By having Mustafa address the influence that power and position have over his European companions’ account of their journey, Lalami highlights the overall role that position and power play in the ways stories are told and historical narratives are constructed. As Altwaiji argues, the stories that we tell and the narratives that we construct at any time are “always a reflection of the national interests, wide horizons, and the state’s politics of that period” (Alwaiji

3). Lalami's novel works to deconstruct the stories told about those people that are minoritized and colonized by creating a self-aware character that directly challenges the narrative told by those in power. With that, Modarres makes the point that *The Moor's Account* "critiques the role of travel accounts in justifying and supporting the violence of colonialism, while it simultaneously illuminates the value of forgotten voices and the influences of multivocality and storytelling as counternarrative and resistance" (Modarres 165). Through the emphasis on storytelling, Lalami's novel not only encourages the denouncement of fixed narratives but also reveals the power of making room for the stories and voices of all groups of people.

Just as the conquerors in *The Moor's Account* are influenced to tell an untruthful account of their journey, characters in *Once in a Promised Land* are compelled to create a story about Jassim that condemns him as a terrorist based on post-9/11 stereotypical narratives. Halaby's novel opens with a "Before" section and ends with an "After." section. The "Before" section of the novel begins with the Arabic phrase "*kan ya ma kan fee qadeem az-zamaan*" ("There was and there wasn't in olden times"), which, according to Reem M. Hilal, begins folk tales in the Arabic tradition (Halaby VII; Hilal 257). Immediately, Halaby sets the foundation for a novel that places high value on storytelling when it comes to upholding Arab American identity in a country that has silenced their voices. The narrator directly addresses the reader in the "Before" section by saying "They say there was or there wasn't in olden times a story as old as life, as young as this moment, a story that is yours and is mine" (Halaby VII). Similarly, Mustafa's mother in *The Moor's Account* tells Mustafa that "Nothing new has ever happened to a son of Adam" and that Everything has already been lived and everything has already been told. If only we listened to the stories" (Lalami 54). Both novels frame their narratives around the nuances of

stories and storytelling, rather than continuing to give one side of the story through a fixed account.

The Moor's Account continues to mirror this concept of storytelling, especially through Mustafa's recounting of his childhood in Azemmur. Lalami separates the novel into the different stories that Mustafa is telling readers, rather than separating the novel by chapters as most conventional narratives do. In doing so, Lalami challenges the conventions of a fixed narrative, instead shedding light on the multivocality and cross-cultural possibilities of storytelling as Mustafa explores all angles and perspectives of his situation. Not only does the content of the unconventional novelistic narrative condemn the corrupt nature of writing fixed written accounts, but the role that oral storytelling plays within Mustafa's life holds significant weight as well. Mustafa's mother values oral storytelling as a key part of their family's culture, and especially as a way to teach. She uses stories to teach Mustafa a lesson and even alters the lesson each time she tells the story; Mustafa says that the first time his mother told the "Story of My Birth" he was still "reluctant to leave her side and venture out alone into the streets of Azemmur" so "she said that I was born on a river, which could only mean that I was fearless then, and I should be brave now" (Lalami 31). Once Mustafa is older, she tells the story again "when she had despaired of making me listen to reason, when she had lost hope that I would remain in Azemmur. She said I had been destined for a life of travel" (31). This happens again when Mustafa's mother tells him "the Story of the Embroiderer and the Sultan" and he is pushed to analyze and question who he plays in the fairytale (53). Mustafa and his mother recognize the power that stories hold in constructing a new narrative for one's identity, and this agency reveals Lalami's desire to use that power as a counternarrative against the biased narratives that have been told about minorities.

It is not just the telling of stories through novels that are essential to deconstructing post-9/11 prejudices; it is also the verbal stories and anecdotes that are passed down to family, friends, and colleagues outside of written narratives. There is significance in maintaining traditions that are true to one's identity and overlapping one's story with other cultures to dispel the dichotomies that have been created. Amanah Eljaji, a "Canadian Muslim woman, scholar, educator, and mother" teaches Muslim youth in a private Islamic school and especially values teaching her students the importance of multi-perspective stories. Eljaji draws inspiration from the TED Talk done by Chimamanda N. Adichie, who asserts that if we only hear about a person, people, place, or situation from one point of view, we risk accepting one experience as the whole truth and we face the danger of a single story; Adichie then explains that this "creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Eljaji 71; Adichie 2009). In light of this, Eljaji encourages people to seek diverse perspectives and tell "the stories only we can tell about our experiences, hopes, and fears, because doing so helps break down the power of dominant stories and stereotypes" (Eljaji 71). By clearly framing both novels as a life story being told to the readers, Lalami and Halaby effectively deconstruct these dominant stereotypes and "single stories" being told by those in power, ultimately giving a voice back to Arabs and Muslims that have been targeted and ignored following the events of 9/11.

Both novels take on this methodology by encouraging readers to maintain an open mind to all voices and recognize all that can be learned from a nuanced story. This especially translates into *Once in a Promised Land* as Halaby shows the dangers of not recognizing the significance of storytelling and counternarratives post-9/11. Jassim becomes the target of prejudices and is

forced to face the consequences of the story that has been constructed around Arab Americans. There is a wall of self-protection that America puts up as they quickly stereotype and label Arab Americans. When Diane realizes that Jack is suspicious about Jassim, she tells him "'Jack, let me tell you, that's absurd. Jassim is a swimmer, not some religious freak'" (Halaby 172-173). Jassim is labeled as a "religious freak" when he does not even practice religion, and even so, Altwaiji brings up the important point that those who critique "Islamic fundamentalism and extremist groups, however, must also refer to a fact that there are also fundamentalist groups in other religions, cultures and political regimes," (Altwaiji 4). Altwaiji voices the failure of Americans such as Jack's character in *Once in a Promised Land* to not only recognize the true stories and identities of Arab Americans post-9/11, but also to recognize the faults in all religions, cultures, and political regimes including all of those that are in America.

Although the Muslim community in the United States is "the most ethnically and racially diverse such community in the world," the stereotypes and labels that are employed on Arab Americans are evident under the facade of national self-preservation (Sandhoff 17). This is also apparent through Jack's accusatory and prejudiced nature; Halaby writes that "Jack had no need to see beyond the act of what he was doing. For the first time in years he felt armed with a righteous and vital responsibility and therefore important, selfless" (Halaby 173). Jack's character represents the dangers of constructing a narrative around a group of people that minimizes them into a one-dimensional label no matter the national interests or situation. In creating a story that shows this, and is intentionally framed by Arabic folklore and traditional storytelling, Halaby further challenges the fixed written accounts and the detriment that they cause.

Lalami continues to emphasize the importance of countering fixed written accounts in *The Moor's Account*, specifically through Mustafa's character. When Dorantes asks him how he ended up in Seville, Mustafa addresses the readers and says "Reader, the joy of a story is in its telling… Telling a story is like sowing a seed—you always hope to see it become a beautiful tree, with firm roots and branches that soar up in the sky. But it is a peculiar sowing, for you will never know whether your seed sprouts or dies" (Lalami 124). After Mustafa tells him about his life, we see Dorantes softening towards Mustafa as he begins to see him more as the human being he is, rather than a piece of property; Mustafa notes that "Later, when we resumed our march, and my exhaustion led me to hold on to his saddle for support, Senor Dorantes did not nudge Abejorro away" (124). When Dorantes softens towards Mustafa after hearing his life story, Lalami highlights the impact that telling one's story has on growing human connections and creating cross-cultural overlaps that can then deconstruct dichotomies caused by fixed written narratives.

Throughout both novels, the authors resist writing one side of the story and encourage multivocality through telling the stories of the characters' lives, as well as through framing the whole novel within Arabic folklore and storytelling customs. They challenge prejudiced and biased fixed narratives, while also showing the power in nuanced storytelling. Although narratives are commonly an unfair reflection of what is happening in the world, that does not mean that authors should challenge other accounts by reflecting only one side of the situation, silencing all other voices besides their own. Both *The Moor's Account* and *Once in a Promised Land* encourage and inspire storytelling through a multi-perspective lens, not only to uphold the identity and culture of Arabs, Muslims, and other minoritized or colonized groups of people, but

also to challenge the fixed single-stories that only encourage prejudice and stereotypes against others.

Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda N. “The danger of a single story.” *TED*, Oct. 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.

Altwaiji, Mubarak. “The Rise of Fundamentalist Narratives - a Post-9/11 Legacy? Toward Understanding American Fundamentalist Discourse.” *Cogent Social Sciences*, vol. 7, no. 1, Jan. 2021, pp. 1–12. EBSCOhost, https://doi-org.silk.library.umass.edu/10.1080/23311886.2021.1970441.

Eljaji, Amanah. “Using (Counter)stories to (Re)shape Our Communities and World(s).” *LEARNing Landscapes*, vol. 14, no. 1, Spring 2021, pp. 67-81. https://files-eric-ed-gov.silk.library.umass.edu/fulltext/EJ1305278.pdf

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

Lalami, Laila. *The Moor’s Account*. New York, Vintage Books, 2015.

Modarres, Andrea. “Re-Placing the Muslim in Early American History: *The Moor’s Account*.” University-Purdue Fort Wayne, 2020.

Reem M. Hilal. Mirroring Hybridity: The use of Arab Folk Tradition in Laila Halaby's Once in a Promised Land and Alia Yunis's The Night Counter. *Arab Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 42 (4):251-271. DOI: 10.13169/arabstudquar.42.4.0251

Sandhoff, Michelle. “Being Muslim in the United States.” *Service in a Time of Suspicion,* University of Iowa Press, Aug. 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt20q234q.5