Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

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No Longer an Incredibly Promised Land: Trauma and Victimhood in the United States After 9/11 in Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and in Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*

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Dissertação intitulada *No Longer an Incredibly Promised Land: Trauma and Victimhood in the United States After 9/11 in Foer's Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and in Halaby' s Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*, de autoria do Mestrando BERNARDO FERRARA BARBOSA APARECIDO, apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras: Estudos Literários da Faculdade de Letras da UFMG, como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de Mestre em Letras: Estudos Literários.

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Abstract

In his novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Jonathan Safran Foer tells us the story of the Schell family after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The narrative is told through the perspective of three main characters: Oskar, Oskar's grandmother, and his grandfather. Oskar, a 9-year-old, has his world turned upside down after the passing of his father, who was at one of the Twin Towers on what Oskar refers to as "the worst day." Laila Halaby, in her novel *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*, takes us to Tucson, Arizona, where we meet Jassim and Salwa: two Arab-American characters whose lives are about to change completely in the aftermath of the attacks in Manhattan. Foer and Halaby show to us readers two sides of the same story, and this thesis aims to analyze these works comparing the traumatic experience lived by Oskar, Salwa and Jassim in order to discuss the idea of victim and victimizer in a post 9/11 United States of America.

Key words: American novel; Arab Americans; trauma; victimhood; terrorism.

Resumo

Em seu romance *Extremamente Alto e Incrivelmente Perto,* Jonathan Safran Foer nos conta a história da família Schell após os ataques terroristas em 11 de setembro, 2001. A obra é narrada através da perspectiva dos três personagens principais: Oskar, sua avó e seu avô. Oskar, uma criança de nove anos de idade, tem o seu mundo revirado de cabeça para baixo após a morte de seu pai que estava em uma das torres, no que ele chama de "o pior dia". Laila Halaby em seu romance *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel* (ainda não traduzido no Brasil), leva-nos a Tucson, no Arizona, onde conhecemos Jassim e Salwa: dois personagens árabe-americanos cujas vidas estão prestes a mudar radicalmente após os ataques em Manhattan. Foer e Halaby nos mostram dois lados da mesma história e esta dissertação tem como objetivo analisar essas obras comparando a experiência vivida por Oskar, Salwa e Jassim para discutir a ideia de vítima e vitimizador nos Estados Unidos após os ataques de 11 de setembro.

Palavras chaves: Romance norte americano, árabe americanos; trauma; vitimização; terrorismo.

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1. Introduction

September 11, 2001 is arguably one of the most important dates in the 21st century. It marks a defining moment not only in US history, but also in world history. Never had any foreign attack happened on American soil, and its aftermath resulted in fear and terror all over the world. It was an attack targeted at the US government and economic symbols; nevertheless, it had a global impact.

When being interviewed by National Geographic, the former US President George W. Bush reflected on what happened that day and shared some of this thoughts and actions. On the day following the attacks, Bush said what many Americans wanted to hear from their leader: "We are going to bring them to justice before they hurt us again. We will find them." It was also at that moment that the motto "Osama Bin Laden: dead or alive" was first said by Bush. When retelling this moment, Bush affirmed that on 9/11 he became a War President, and that on the 12th, he acted as one.

As he then visited the site of the attacks to the World Trade Center (WTC), he recalls that "from the air it looked like a giant scar," and added that "when you actually got to the site it was like walking into hell." As he talked to the workers who were at the site clearing out the debris and searching for survivors, he realized that those people were requesting answers and wanted to know if he would go after the ones who were behind the attacks. "Go get them, George!" shouted one of the workers. He addressed them and said that he could hear their request and that "the people who knocked these buildings down will hear from all of us soon." At the end of his interview, President Bush argues that "the terrorist never won," and concluded that "they were never going to defeat America" *(George W. Bush: The 9/11 Interview).*

Although when talking about 9/11 much is centered in New York and the World Trade Center towers, the act of terrorism also reached the Pentagon, therefore, attacking one of the American centers of intelligence. This incident, however, was not as publicly displayed as the images of the Twin Towers falling down. These, conversely, were shown around the world, mainly in the USA, almost in a loop.

The American society was puzzled with the question of who could have ever done such barbarity to their country. People were afraid of going to large public places, which were believed to be potential targets for further terrorist attacks. With the discovery of Anthrax, every white and suspicious powder was the cause of a massive investigation. In his book *Remembering 9/11*, Victor Jeleniewski Seidler states that "it took time for people to believe that this [Anthrax] was not another episode of organized terrorism that was attacking the way people could communicate" (10). Shopping centers and malls were being constantly watched and thoroughly inspected. Many are the cases of regular citizens, most of them Arab-Americans, being held almost hostage by the police, and being harassed by society simply because they were of Arab origin, or even because one might look suspicious.

Society was afraid and traumatized, and the media were making sure that those images would never be forgotten. According to Anna Hartnell, "this 'media therapy' therefore engages in a process of retraumatization." Additionally, she affirms that this "widespread television footage of the attacks made the event available to those who did not experience it first hand" (480). However, this was not exclusive to the American media; the whole world was in shock. I remember what I was doing when I heard about the attacks, the moment that I first saw the images of the first tower falling down, and especially what I felt when watching those images. As I had been to New York a month and a half before the attacks, I remember that I felt a mix of a shocking surprise and fear. In his book *Out of the Blue*, Kristiaan Versluys states that "in a time of globalized witnessing and shared vicarious experience, an

event like 9/11 is a rupture for everyone" (4). The repetition of the images helped the government to achieve a certain level of extended trauma, which most likely also assisted them when moving their political and war agendas.

In her article "No 'Clash of Civilizations': An analysis of imaginative geographies in Arab print media after 9/11" [1], professor Shadia Husseini de Araújo discusses Huntington's ideas that after the Cold War the greatest world conflicts would not be between States, rather it would be between world civilizations. According to Huntington, the Islamic world would be the Occident's biggest threat, as he claims that "faith and family, blood and belief are the ideas with which people identify and for which they will fight and die" (74). To some extent, the American War on Terror and the terrorist acts against the United State are religiously driven, and there was back then, and there still is, a huge tension between these two cultures.

Araújo also discusses that despite being widely, and controversially, discussed, the "clash of civilizations" theory has been used as a way to "explain the broadcast of heavily politically charged news on the attacks done by terrorists in the Occident on behalf of the Islamic religion" (74). Also, according to the author, the problem of using this discourse is that it legitimizes the so called "war on terror," which is used to justify wars, invasions, occupations, the existence of prisons such as Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, as well as declarations of state of emergency. She further adds that the problem of the reproduction of such discourse is that it fosters xenophobia, racism, and islamophobia (74).

On the other hand, Araújo comments on the fact that there are few studies focusing on the analyses of the geopolitical discourses associated with the Arab media after 9/11. She affirms these studies are relevant and important as she claims that the clear majority of the Arab and Muslim communities do not identify themselves with the radical Islamic groups

[1] As this article is originally written and published in Brazilian Portuguese, all quotes herein were translated by the author of this thesis, except for the title of the article in English, which was taken from the article itself.

(75). This idea is of extreme importance to my research, as I believe that by not identifying themselves with the radical Islamic groups, it could be supported that the Arab-American community may in fact not be related in any way to the attacks, and that they might be seen as victims just as well.

Literature, like the media in general, began to represent such matters and traumas. Many American writers, on the one hand, wrote about what it meant to be American after that day; how society was at that moment different than before; how they, as the "victims" of those attacks, were dealing with their loss and trying to move on. On the other hand, these literary representations did not come only from the "victim" side. When discussing literature after the attacks, Philip Metres states that "this is a moment of remarkable and unprecedented literary production among Arab-Americans" (3). Arab-Americans started, then, to write about how they felt regarding the attacks; how they were then seen as part of society, and mainly, how they were also traumatized by the aftermath of that day.

We can list representative writers, both American and Arab-American, who dealt with the theme of 9/11, but for the purpose of this research, two novels were selected to be analyzed and compared: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel*[2]. The former, written by an American novelist, tells us a story centered around Oskar, a nine-year-old who lost his father on September 11. The latter, written by an Arab-American writer, takes us into the lives of Jassim and Salwa, who are from Jordan, in the events after the attacks. Both novels are set in the same timeframe; that is, both narratives begin just before 9/11 and are developed in the period that followed that day.

[2] Some examples of the extensive literary production on 9/11 are John Updike's *Terrorist*, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Stephen King's short story "The Things They Left Behind," *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid, *Home Boy* by HM Nagvi, among many others.

According to her article published in *Al Jadid*, Pauline Homsi Vinson proposes that the USA is "the promise of happiness," and that "she entices dreamers to her promised land only to lull them into complacency with her riches and rob them of the hoped-for happy ending." The characters in both novels have, in a way, gone to America hoping for a better life and the fulfillment of their desires. Jassim, who is a hydrologist, goes to Arizona with the dream of working with water for the sake of humankind, whilst Salwa, who was born in the US but lived her whole life in Jordan, follows her husband seeking the indulgence of her desires. Oskar's family, on the other hand, came from Germany escaping the terrors of World War II, having lost so much after the bombing of their native Dresden, just to be met again, years later, with the loss in the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

1.1. Psychological Trauma: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and other Concepts

When discussing trauma, Bessel van der Kolk states that the way one perceives, and experiences trauma is one of society's most important issues, as it can come from a variety of sources: war, physical abuse, social violence, natural disasters, to name a few. The outcomes of such experiences can affect the victims' lives in such ways that it "comes to dominate the victims; consciousness, depleting their lives of meaning and pleasure," and can be manifested differently according to each individual (7). Seidler, when comparing Derrida's and Freud's discussions of trauma, states that the latter teaches us to place it "within a past that insists on making itself felt in the present," whereas the former suggests that "the wound remains open by our terror before the *future* and not only the past" (2). Seidler also mentions, on the other hand, that "trauma takes time to register," and that "it goes through different stages," and suggests that the passing of a decade, for example, might be significant, but it will not necessarily bring closure (x).

To help understand how Oskar dealt with his father's passing, it is necessary to look at the psychological aspect of his reaction to the events on 9/11. From a medical standpoint, Alisic et alli, in their article "Building Child Trauma Theory from Longitudinal Studies: A Meta-Analysis," quotes the American Psychiatric Association's concept of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as being

> characterized by overwhelming feelings of reexperiencing the traumatic events (e.g., nightmares and intrusive thoughts), by the avoidance of stimuli and emotional numbing (e.g., avoiding places related to the event and feeling detached from others), and by symptoms of hyperarousal (e.g.; concentration difficulties and hypervigilance [. . .]). (737)

This concept is of extreme importance to my thesis, as it deals with a spectrum of possible representations of signs of PTSD, which I believe are largely present in the lives of the characters in both novels.

Alisic et alli go further and state that children respond differently from adults to the same traumatic event, which helps us understand better Oskar's failure to understand how his mother is, in a way, so reasonable at times to her late husband's death, and simply moves on and starts a new relationship with Ron, a man who also lost his spouse in the attacks. The authors also mention that children "rely heavily on how their parents deal with stress" and that their adjustment to trauma in relation to their environment is done in a differently than it is done by their parents (737). This dissonance on their grieving creates a huge strain on their son-mother relationship and leads Oskar to believe that his mom does not miss her late husband, nor cry for his passing, resulting in Oskar wishing it were his mother in the Towers, and not his father.

Van der Kolk, in his article "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the Nature of Trauma," complements the concept of PTSD abovementioned by claiming that it is "a disorder in which

the memory of the traumatic event comes to dominate the victims' consciousness, depleting their lives of meaning and pleasure" (7). He shares the same idea described by Alisic et alli that PTSD has a recurrent and reliving element; however, he goes beyond and suggests that, "in contrast to the actual trauma, which had a beginning, middle, and end, the symptoms of PTSD take on a timeless character." He further states that these repetitions and timeless character are terrifying and prevent an individual from dealing with the present (9).

These two important complementing definitions of what PTSD is and how it can interfere with one's live will be of extreme help in the development of my thesis, as it will outline what can actually be considered as manifestations of PTSD symptoms presented in the novels through Oskar's, Jassim's and Salwa's actions and experiences.

Arin Keeble, in his book *The 9/11 Novel*, states that the incessant repetition of the images of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center, and of the attacks in general, helped to contribute to the establishment of trauma (42). Keeble's ideas add to what is described by Alisic et alli. He also stated that the idea of trauma has to do with the repetition of the original traumatic stimulus, thus, one might conclude that by constantly repeating the attacks, Oskar, and society as a whole, became traumatized. However, this repetition might not be only said in relation to Oskar's experience, as Jassim also replays the images of the planes while trying to carry on with his morning swimming routine.

When dealing with trauma in Foer's novels, Kristiaan Versluys suggests that the attempts of the three narrator-protagonists (Oskar, Oskar's grandfather, and Oskar's grandmother) to "bring their various losses to language,[. . .], suggest that a traumatic event such as September 11 is ultimately incommensurate and beyond full comprehension" (15). I do believe that this concept of not being able to put into words one's trauma is not exclusive to Foer's novel. Halaby's characters, Jassim and Salwa, in turn, are also unable, in various situations, to fully communicate with one another, which resulted, throughout the novel, in

their stranding from each other. However, when discussing trauma and the loss of language in Foer's work, I will mainly focus on Oskar's narrative, as I believe that, as the other two narrators (Oskar's grandparents) have experienced previous pain and trauma due to the Dresden bombings during World War II, they may not have been able to have processed those past losses. Therefore, I believe that their narratives might be deviant from the aims of this thesis.

Moreover, Dominick LaCapra's ideas that when talking about trauma "something of the past remains, if only as a haunting presence or revenant" (700), complements the notion that by searching for the meaning of the Key he finds in his father's closet, Oskar is actually searching for his father. His quest for answers is the only reminiscence of the *Reconnaissance Expedition* (a game he and his father used to play, in which the latter would give the former a task or puzzle to solve) Oskar has. I would argue that this is his only "contact" with his father, and his only way to try to make sense of his loss. Furthermore, LaCapra suggests that "losses are specific and involve particular events, such as the death of loved ones on a personal level or, on a broader scale, the losses brought about by apartheid or by the Holocaust [. . .], including both the lives and the cultures of affected groups" (700). If we take this idea stated by LaCapra, that loss can be both personal and socially broader, it is evidently clear that Oskar suffered from both. However, this idea that broader events can also bring about losses to the lives of the groups which were affected by them directly relates to Jassim and Salwa's lives. They might not have suffered a personal loss, but I strongly argue that they might have been affected by the attacks in the broader, cultural and social sense.

When thinking that Oskar lost his father in a warlike event, and that Jassim and Salwa were "only" affected by those same attacks, one might argue that the trauma experienced by him is completely different from theirs, who have not lost anything or anyone. However, as Breithaupt (qtd. in Hartnell 480-81) mentions, the constant exposure of the images of the

falling towers, Bin Laden, and a variety of patriotic symbols, creates an "ideology of 'trauma'," with its "most prominent, and so to say, appealing aspect" being "the innocence of the victim." With this in mind, and carrying the powerful message delivered by President Bush that those who have attacked America would be persecuted, the American population started seeing all of the Arab-American community as potential terrorists. Therefore, one might also argue that, despite not having lost anyone, they might have indeed lost something: their place in society.

1.2. Cultural Trauma: Social Dissociation, Anomie and other Concepts.

In Halaby's narrative, Jassim and Salwa are not very often seen practicing Arab traditions. As Amanda Lloyd states, they establish some connections with other Arab-American families and at the same time, they embrace a life of consumerism often associated with middle class Americans. She also mentions, however, that they "find it increasingly difficult to maintain their accepted place in American identity," in the events following the attacks (7).

In his book *Suicide*, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim lays his propositions for three main types of suicides and their causes. When discussing what he calls "anomic suicide," Durkheim mainly discusses the idea of how abrupt economic and social changes on an individual's life may lead that person to commit suicide as there is no sense of belonging to society anymore, thus being faced with social anomie. Even though there was no indication in Halaby's novel of such extreme measure, in my opinion, it is clear through the narrative that Jassim and Salwa experienced some degree of social anomie after the attacks.

In the beginning of the novel, we come across a passage in which Jassim and Salwa are at the mall a few days after the attacks. While Salwa is looking through a store, Jassim stares at a motorcycle being displayed there. They soon notice that a security woman keeps observing him. When confronted about it, the woman replies that someone reported Jassim

and that it was probably nothing. Salwa, infuriated, decides to confront one of the store clerks who says "he was just standing and looking at the motorcycle. It was weird." The girl explains that Jassim's attitude was scaring her and that she "remembered all the stuff that's been going on." When confronted again by Salwa about the unlikely event that Jassim would blow up the mall, the girl simply responded that she had lost an uncle who was in the Twin Towers, to which Salwa responded that she was sorry to hear that and asked her if she was planning to have every Arab arrested. Salwa, after talking to the manager, decides to leave the store and as she explained what had happened to her husband, she says "her uncle died in the Twin Towers," to which Jassim wondered what that had to do with him (29-30). Such confrontation, most likely, would not have happened, had it not been for the attacks on September 11. Had Jassim looked "suspiciously" to the motorcycle some weeks earlier, the salesperson would probably have not done anything. This particular scene explores the almost immediate anomie experienced by the characters.

Lloyd also states that the novel depicts them as almost "de-cultured in contrast to [Halaby's] other Arab-American characters." Salwa and Jassim are alienated to a point that 9/11 defies and makes them question "their adoption of an American way of life and pursuit of the American dream" (9). The aftermath changed everything for the couple. Characters who are shown as being racially tolerant in the beginning of the novel, such as co-workers, start, later in the narrative, to doubt and question them. Jassim, who becomes the target of an FBI investigation, has his boss, Marcus, doubt his innocence even though he, at first, defended his co-worker.

In the preface to her novel, Halaby tells us that,

> Our main characters are Salwa and Jassim. We really come to know them only after the World Trade Center buildings have been flattened by planes flown by Arabs, by

> Muslim. Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslim. But of course, they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center.
>
> Nothing and everything. (viii)

Jassim and Salwa would have continued to be seen as any other Arab-American, as any other "regular" citizen, had it not been for the attacks. Jassim and Salwa were just as much part of a society that, in the political level, had everything to do with the attacks.

The attacks generated a War on Terror, in which anyone suspicious had to be reported for the sake of National Security. Government measures, such as the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Patriotic Act only made it easier for certain governmental measures, which some might consider irrational, to be justified. They were all for the "greater good" and fight against the Terrorists, Terror and the Axis of Evil. This, nevertheless, helped to create an even more traumatized and scared society.

In Foer's novel, on the other hand, Oskar loses all his sense of belonging after his father's death, which can also be seen as some type of anomie, i.e. Oskar finds it difficult and believes he no longer has any sense of recognition and belonging to the society as a whole. He does not understand his mother's pain and newly found friendship with another man. He does not understand who the tenant that just moved into his grandmother's apartment is, as well as how she could not be suffering the same way he was over her son's death. Oskar cannot comprehend society's apparent unfairness towards his father's death, leading him to feel "extremely depressed" and "incredibly alone" (171). Although Oskar's anomie might be considered as "personal anomie" rather than "social anomie," such difference will not be dealt in detail in this thesis, as what is important is the comparative experience lived by the characters in both novels.

Similarly to the repeating images of the falling towers, Oskar plays on loop the messages his father left on the answering machine while he was inside World Trade Center as as way to make himself feel something. The attacks forced Oskar to find meaning in his father's death, as well as a constant struggle to actually find out how he died:

> I want to stop inventing. If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn't have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors, which happened to some people and I wouldn't have to imagine him trying to crawl down the outside of the building, which I saw a video of one person doing on a Polish site, or trying to use a tablecloth as parachute, like some of the people who were in Windows of the World actually did. There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know with was his. (257)

In his attempt to manage trauma, he tries to reconstruct his traumatic experience, no matter how painful it might be to him. Jane Kilby (qtd. in Scheuren 6) states that "trauma is therefore impossible to experience at the time and is difficult to grasp in the here and now." This is, clearly, something extremely difficult for Oskar to comprehend and cope with.

In Halaby's novel, contrary to what happens in Foer's work, there is not a physical loss; her characters do not lose a loved one, as it happens to Oskar and his family. Jassim and Salwa actually suffer a disconnection from their role and place in society as a result of the attacks. When dealing with the crisis of the representation of Arab-American identity through literature, Carol Fadda-Conrey mentions that the dream and happiness Jassim and Salwa sought when immigrating to the USA become "permanently out of reach" after the attacks. Additionally, she suggests that the terrorist attacks left "them physically and spiritually broken and estranged from each other" (542). Jassim and Salwa lived a false sense of belonging to the American society and mainly to the American Dream. Right after the attacks, Salwa tells her husband that Randa, a friend of theirs, is worried about her children suffering

any kind of attack due to the visibility Arab Americans now had. Jassim firmly believed, at that point, that they would be not be treated differently and that society would not discriminate against Arab Americans in general.

> "Randa is worried about her kids, thinks someone might try to hurt them," she told him latter.
>
> "Why would anyone hurt Randa's kids? People are not so ignorant as to take revenge on a Lebanese family for the acts of a few extremist Saudis who destroyed those buildings." He had promptly been proved wrong when a Sikh gas station attendant in Phoenix was killed *in retaliation*. (21)

According to Amanda Lloyd, "9/11 propelled Arab Americans out of the realm of the invisible," helping society target them as enemies of the State and Homeland Security. She also states that Arab-American authors responded to this movement by writing about characters struggling with their "hybrid identity." The events following the attacks catalyzed a downfall in Jassim and Salwa's marriage. The former finds himself being investigated by the FBI, as well as losing the respect from his peers at work; the latter, who was born in the US but raised in Jordan, feels "ostracized by the citizens of the country in which she was born" (1-2). Getting disconnected from the reality and social status they were used to leads to their marriage falling apart. Lloyd also states that by the end of the novel, the characters are found morally empty, having lost all their reference of belonging to the American society (1-2).

In her essay "Violence, Mourning, Politics", Judith Butler mentions that "the United States was supposed to be the place that could not be attacked" (39). Additionally, Butler states that, by being attacked, the American national border was seen as more fragile than one might have thought. She argues that as a result "anxiety, rage" and "a radical desire for security" led to a state of hyper surveillance, in which anyone who slightly resembled as an Arab was now seen badly by society all in the name of "self-defense." This movement

included even people from other ethnic backgrounds, such as Sikhs and Hindus, or even Arab-Americans who have lived in the country for decades (39).

The actions which Butler here mentions, in my opinion, come straight from fear of the foreigner, the outsider. Furthermore, according to Seidler, Bush's discourse of the idea that you are "either with us or against us" also helped to foster this dualistic idea of "friend" and "enemy" that many Americans used to justify their discriminatory actions (14).

Contrary to Bush's ideas of "us against them," when talking about the various pictures of the missing people posted after the attacks, Versluys states that they gave "a face to the faceless," and that they represented people from "all walks of life, all social classes, all ethnicities and religious background." He further suggests that this provided "a collective identity to New York in its hour of need." Moreover, he also claims that moments right after 9/11 presented a "utopian moment of solidarity . . . transcending the usual dividers of gender, race, and class" (8), which we now know was extremely temporary.

Despite experiencing different "Americas" after the attacks, the characters' lives, in both novels, were completely changed in the aftermath. May it be by the grief of a late parent, or by having all their place in society being reassessed, 9/11 played a significant role in the reshaping of their lives.

By comparing the experiences portrayed in both novels, I would like to discuss the similarities and differences of their post-9/11 experiences, as well as how the trauma and idea of being a victim have affected their lives, and how society now views them – mostly how society views the Arab-American characters. To my mind, this comparison is important to break Bush's aforementioned idea that there must be sides to this story. Of course, if we take into consideration the economic and political background of the attacks, there is much more to be analyzed. Even though this background might be discussed throughout this text, it will

not be taken as the main focus of the analyses as this is a literary study, and not a political one.

1.3. The Idea of "Victim" and "Victimizer"

When one thinks about September 11, in my opinion, it is common to remember the images of the falling Twin Towers, as well as American national symbols. I believe that, when remembering this historical moment, arguably one of the most, if not the most, important events of the 21st century, few people will be concerned about the Arab Americans who lived in the United States and any kind of prejudice they may have suffered. Although, I believe, mainstream media focused more on the American representation of 9/11, such as in works like Oliver Stone's 2006 *World Trade Center*, and even in the 2011 movie adaptation of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, there are also important works focused on Arab-Americans characters with the objective to portray "the other side." This thesis intends, through the comparative analysis of both novels, to propose a new perspective on the idea of "victimized" and "victim" by focusing on the characters' – namely Oskar, Jassim and Salwa – traumas as a result of the attacks to the WTC. The main goal of this master's thesis is to discuss whether Halaby's Arab-American characters can also be seen as victims of the attacks as Oskar in Foer's novel.

Along this discussion, other questions need be investigated, such as: How do the Americans and Arab Americans, in the novels, react and cope with the aftermath? What do they lose with the attacks? How are their lives different after 9/11? How are they seen by society? How do they see themselves?

By comparing the characters' experiences, I want to show that they are, in fact, very similar. Despite being seen as the "victimizers" by the American society, the Arab-American community was just as innocent as the ones who died in the Twin Towers were. In both

novels, the characters have their perspective on the world changed. While Oskar lost his greatest reference – his father – and now desperately seeks for answers, Jassim and Salwa start questioning their own participation in the so called *American Dream*.

Even though they stand on different sides of the story – one being seen by many as the victim, and the other as the evil within society, thus, the "enemy" – they are both living under the same "roof." The three of them were part of that American society and culture that, in many ways, was one of the causes of the attacks. Therefore, in this light, one might argue that they are both, in fact, just as much victims as they are victimizers. By raising this discussion and comparing how the attacks brought about traumatic experiences to the characters, I believe we might be able to understand better how the events changed American society through the lenses of these two novels. There might not have been a "victim" and a "victimizer" per se.

To begin this discussion, a comparative and analytical reading of the novels will be done in the next chapters in order to find relevant passages related to the effects the events on 9/11 had on the characters' lives. Additionally, I will try to understand how they coped with the attacks and will try to assess if they indeed went through a traumatic experience, and, if so, in what ways they were similar for the characters. For this purpose, it will be important to rely on the concepts of trauma and its representations in literature, i.e. how trauma is written and organized in the narrative as well as its reconstructive mechanisms. Moreover, understanding various concepts of the psychological and psychiatric aspects of trauma, i.e. what is considered to be trauma, how people deal and cope with it, and the effects it has on an individual's life, will also be of outmost importance for the discussion.

The general objective of this study, which is to compare Foer's and Halaby's novels focusing on the characters' traumatic experiences that resulted from the World Trade Center terrorist attacks. To achieve such objective, I will rely on what trauma and PTSD are

according to van der Kolk and Alisic et alli. Moreover, the ideas of cultural trauma as discussed by Christine Muller, as well as the definitions of **victim** and **victimizer** according to Oxford Dictionary of English will also be of extreme importance in the analyses.

On the one hand, in the entry for "victim," OED defines it as "a person harmed, [. . .] as a result of a crime, accident or other event or action." It also defined it as "a person who has come to feel helpless and passive in the face of misfortune or ill-treatment." On the other hand, "victimizer" has its definition connected with the verb "victimize," which is described as to "single (someone) out for cruel and unjust treatment." Therefore, we can conclude that a victimizer is someone who cruelly or *unjustly*, being the latter a key element of this concept, excludes one from a group, or, most relevantly to my thesis, from society.

The discussion of how the lives of the characters were changed cannot be forgotten, as it is key to help us understand how trauma is in fact present in their lives. This discussion of their relation to society, and how they see themselves as being part of it or not, is paramount to my thesis. Nevertheless, an analysis of how the characters now relate to each other, taking into consideration how Oskar's relationship with his mother has changed and how Jassim and Salwa are unable to communicate with each other, will be done. Most importantly, it is necessary to discuss whether, indeed, Oskar, Jassim and Salwa suffered any kind of trauma, and how this traumatic experience has affected their lives.

To complement my analysis, other points and questions need to be taken in consideration. I will examine the way in which both novels portray their characters' reactions to the attacks, and how they cope with the aftermath. Additionally, it is important to discuss the repetition of images, both in the media, and as well inside the characters' minds, as a way to consolidate and enforce the traumatic event, as it is suggested by Arin Keeble.

The methodological approach of this research is mainly based on theoretical bibliography to supply grounds and insights to help me discuss my claims and objectives.

Focusing mostly on the concepts of trauma and victim/victimizer, texts which deal with the former on a psychoanalytical literary theory aspect, on a clinical psychiatric point of view, as well as texts dealing with cultural trauma theory, which are key elements in this research. The latter, in turn, as previously mentioned, will be defined using a most formal definition taken from *Oxford Dictionary of English*. Moreover, readings of texts related to the literary production after 9/11, both done by American novelists and Arab-American authors, are extremely useful to understand better what kinds of narrative techniques and representations are present in this "literary movement," if we can claim it to be one.

Furthermore, a comparative and analytical reading of the novels will be presented in the following chapters in order to discuss relevant passages relating to the effects that the events on 9/11 had on the characters. Additionally, I will try to understand how they coped with them, and if they indeed went through a traumatic experience, and if so, in what ways it was similar or different for the characters.

2. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close:* An Expedition through Trauma and Pain

September 11, 2001 could have been any other day in our lives; however, it was a day of great tragedy and loss. In his novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Jonathan Safran Foer takes us on an expedition through loss and trauma through the eyes of a 9-year-old, the young Oskar. The novel is divided into three main narratives: Oskar's, and Oskar's grandparents'. The story of the novel is told through the same repeated sequence of narratives (Oskar-Grandfather-Oskar-Grandmother-Oskar), as each chapter focuses on only one of these perspectives.

Oskar Schell, the main character of the book, lost his father on the attacks on 9/11. He is trying to cope with the fact that his world no longer makes sense at the same time that he is looking for the meaning of a mysterious key he finds in a vase in his late father's closet. The renter, whom we discover to be Thomas Schell Sr, Oskar's estranged grandfather, has lost the love of his life, Anna, after his hometown, Dresden, was bombed during World War II. Thomas never recovered from this traumatic experience, and as a result, he lost his words little by little up to a point where he could no longer speak. He then moves from Germany to the United States as a way to escape from his past, trauma and Anna's memory. Oskar's grandmother, having also survived the bombings, coincidently moves to New York too, where she, one day, sees Thomas and talks to him. The two of them married, but the Schells' survivor guilt and Anna's death were simply too much for the couple to handle. Thomas Schell Sr leaves his wife after learning she was pregnant.

As mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis, I will mainly focus on Oskar's narrative, which does not mean that Oskar's grandparents' narratives will be completely overlooked and not taken into consideration. However, as these two characters carry with themselves past traumas, griefs and loss, I believe much of how they process their most recent

tragedy after 9/11 is actually influenced by the fact they were unable to process those past traumas properly and fully.

Before I begin discussing how Oskar is processing his feelings towards his father's passing, I would like to give a short summary of the novel, as I believe it will be of great help when exposing my arguments and throughout the discussion in general.

Jonathan Safran Foer begins his narrative on the day the Schells are burying Thomas Schell. While riding in the limousine to the cemetery, Oskar is constantly inventing things: from a teakettle which would be able to read in his father's voice to help him sleep to a tiny microphone connected to a speaker which would allow one to hear another's heartbeats. Desperately wishing to have his tambourine with him so he could calm himself, Oskar is wearing "heavy boots," an expression Oskar uses to convey his overwhelming sadness. He invents a skyscraper that would descend and ascend instead of the elevator, "while its elevator would stay in place. So if you wanted to go to the ninety-fifth floor, you'd just press the 95 button and the ninety-floor would come to you." Oskar also says this type of building would be extremely useful in case of an accident such as the attacks in Manhattan, because "the building could take you to the ground floor, and everyone could be safe" (3).

He does not know how to express his feelings to his mother, and he believes that "if she could have chosen, it would have been [his] funeral [they] were driving to" (6). However, when he asked her if she still loved him, she replies that she has never loved him more. He made her the bracelet that she was wearing that day, and despite the fact that making her happy and loving her is one of his *raisons d´être,* Oskar simply cannot find words to talk to her and express his grief properly.

The night before the "worst day," an expression Oskar would often use to refer to September 11, Oskar and his father, Thomas Schell, were together at home. His father was tucking him in bed and telling him the story of New York's lost sixth borough. When he

finished his story, he kissed Oskar in his forehead and said good night. Their last words to each other that night were: “Dad?” “Yeah, buddy?” “Nothing” (14). The next time Oskar would hear his father’s voice would be the following day, at around 10:18, when Oskar got home from school. Due to the attacks, the students were sent home earlier that day from school. Oskar checked the answering machine and heard the five messages his father had left: the first one at 8:52, “one at 9:12, one at 9:31, one at 9:46, and one at 10:04” (15). At 10:22, Thomas would call for the last time. Oskar would not pick up. His father’s last massage would then haunt little Oskar, as he burdens himself with the fact that he was too scared and unable to pick it up, and perhaps, to have talked one last time and said goodbye to his father.

It is a year now after the attacks, and Oskar still questions his mother whether she was in love with Ron, a friend of hers, or not, as he feels the need to tell her that she should not be doing certain things, such as playing Scrabble, looking herself in the mirror, or even listening to music at a certain volume. In his opinion, “it wasn’t fair to Dad, and it wasn’t fair to me [Oskar]” (35) Despite having these strong opinions on how one should behave after what had happened, Oskar decided to bury everything and not vocalize his grief, even after a year had passed since the terrorist attacks.

One evening, while his mother was at home with Ron listening to music and talking, Oskar, who was supposed to be sleeping, went into his mother’s room and decided to look through his father’s closet. He finds a vase on the top shelf of the closet and as he tries to reach for it, he slips and falls, bringing the vase down with him. As the vase hits the floor, it breaks into many pieces revealing an envelope with the name Black written on it. Inside, there is a key. Desperate to find the lock to that key, and certain that by searching for it, he would be closer to his father and would not miss him so much, Oskar decides to visit all the people in New York City whose last name is Black in the hopes of finding what he is looking for.

He makes a list of all the Blacks in the city and organizes them geographically and alphabetically. He plans what would be his last "Reconnaissance Expedition," a game Oskar and his father would play together, and he sets out to discover whose key it was, what it has to do with his father, and what the key opens. However, afraid to tell his mother and grandmother about it, he decides to hide it from them and starts telling a web of lies, which he would count, as he had never lied before.

Little by little, Oskar would visit different Blacks during the weekend. However, after several months searching for the key, he feels as if he is getting nowhere and instead of getting closer to his father and missing him less, Oskar feels exactly the opposite:

> [looking for the key] gave me heavy boots, because it reminded me of the lock that I still hadn't found, and how until I found it, I didn't love Dad enough (251)

> I've been searching for more than six months, and I don't know a single thing that I didn't know six months ago . . . Also, I've had to tell a googolplex of lies, which doesn't make me feel good about myself, *and* I've bothered a lot of people who I've probably ruined chances of ever being real friends with, *and* I miss my dad more now than when I started, even though the whole *point* was to *stop* missing him (255).

After 8 months searching for the key, an "exhausted and frustrated and pessimistic" Oskar (287) hears an old message left at his home answering machine from Abby Black, who was the first Black he visited. During that visit, when he asked her about the key, Abby said she did not know whose key it was, when in fact, it was her ex-husband's. When Oskar was at Abby's house, she and her ex-husband, William, were fighting, and Abby lied to Oskar about the key as she had no desire to help her ex-husband. Oskar returns to Abby's house who takes him to see William. Oskar shows him the key and discovers the whole story about it.

William's father died some time before Thomas, Oskar's father. William decided to sell everything his father owned, and one day, looking for a nice anniversary present to give to his wife, Thomas visits William's estate sale and buys a blue vase for his wife; the same blue vase found by Oskar in his father's closet. Thomas tells William that he has a special fancy night out on September 14th to celebrate their anniversary. When asked about what the key opens, William says that it opens a bank safe box, whose content he does not know of.

Disappointed, Oskar meets with the renter,[3] with whom he had planned to unearth his father's coffin. When they finally managed to dig all the dirt from Thomas's coffin, Oskar is somewhat surprised that there is nothing and no one inside it, even though he knew they had buried an empty coffin. Without really knowing what to do with the new unburden of not having to find the key, and being faced with an open coffin, Oskar is not sure what to put inside of it. The renter, who we discover to be Oskar's grandfather, had been carrying two suitcases with letters to fill his late son's coffins with all the words he was never able to tell him while he was alive.

When Oskar got home at 4:22 am, his mother was waiting for him on the sofa. Oskar asks her if she would like to know where he was, to which she replies that he will tell her if he would like her to know. He questions whether she and Ron were mad at him, to which she answers no. Oskar goes to his room and lays down in bed still with dirt from the graveyard. Unable to sleep, he runs back to the living room and finds his mother at the same place. He cries and says,

'I don't want to be hospitalized.'

'You're not going to be hospitalized.'

[3] Throughout the novel, Oskar refers to his grandfather as being "the renter," as Oskar was told his grandmother had rented a spare room in her apartment to an old friend. It is only at the end of the novel that Oskar understands that the renter is in fact his father's estranged father, who ran away years ago.

> I told her, ‘I promise I’m going to be better soon.’
>
> She said, ‘There’s nothing wrong with you.’
>
> …
>
> I told her, ‘I tried incredibly hard. I don’t know how I could have tried harder.’
>
> She said, ‘Dad would have been very proud of you.’ (323)

Oskar then tells his mom, for the first time in almost two years, that his father had called from the Towers. He tells her about the messages and tells her that he is okay with her falling in love again if she wants to. He eventually falls asleep, and on the next day, he picks his book *Stuff That Happened to Me*, removes the pages with pictures of a man falling from the World Trade Center and reverses the order. In the original order, when Oskar would flip the pages, it would seem as if the falling man was constantly falling down. By reversing the order, when flipping through these pages really fast, the man is no longer falling from the towers; he is going up instead. Oskar then imagines if he had more pictures to tell the man’s story, who he sometimes pictured to be his father, he would be lifted up back into the building, the plane would fly out of the towers and back to the airport, and his father would be able to walk all the way home, and they “would have been safe” (326).

2.1. Losing Everything: The Incomprehensible Dimensions of Trauma.

On what Oskar calls “the worst day,” as soon as he arrived home from school, he heard his father’s first message, left at 8:52 am, which says:

> Message one. Tuesday, 8:52 A.M. *Is anybody there? Hello? It’s Dad. If you’re there, pick up. I just tried the office, but no one was picking up. Listen, something’s happened. I’m OK. They’re telling us to stay where we are and wait for the firemen. I’m sure it’s fine. I’ll give you another call when I have a better idea of what’s going*

on. Just wanted to let you know that I'm OK, and not to worry. I'll call again soon. (14-15)

His next four messages would span out in the next two hours, as he would try to contact anyone in the house. At 10:22:27, Thomas called one last time. Oskar looked at the caller ID and did not pick it up. When leaving his last message, he would simply ask "are you there?" Thomas kept asking if Oskar was there for one minute and twenty-seven seconds, and at 10:24, his sixth and last message ended (301-02). Soon after, the North Tower, where Thomas was, collapsed. Oskar's life changed at that exact moment.

Oskar, who at the beginning of the book is described as a very intellectually active child, has many interests and loves exploring and learning new things. He has his father help him write his business card, which he would later in the narrative hand out to all the Blacks he would visit. In his card, Oskar describes himself as being an "inventor, jewelry designer, jewelry fabricator, amateur entomologist, Francophile, vegan, origamist, pacifist, percussionist, amateur astronomer, computer consultant, amateur archeologist," and that he collected "rare coins, butterflies that died natural deaths, miniature cacti, Beatles memorabilia, semiprecious stones, and other things" (99). It is clear that his interests are various and wide, which might be unusual for a 9-year-old. However, when faced with his loss, and trying to cope with his father's sudden death, Oskar slowly becomes less and less interested in those things.

A few weeks after 9/11, Oskar started to write letters to a variety of people whom he admires, including the late Stephen Hawking, whom he asked if he could be his protégé. When stamping his letters, Oskar decides to use stamps from his collection, including some which were valuable. He perceives this choice as being an odd one, as he could have easily used regular stamps, and wonders if that was his way of trying to get rid of things (11). To my mind, Oskar's desire to rid himself of his interests is a sign of his inability to find meaning in

life, and thus, lack of enthusiasm about nothing other than finding who the key belongs to and discovery its connection to his late father.

Moreover, after the attacks, Oskar becomes afraid of doing several things he was used to doing before:

> Even after a year, I still had an extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously. There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I am not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subways grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans. A lot of the times I'd get the feeling that I was in the middle of a huge black ocean, or in deep space, but not in the fascinating way. (36)

Taking this passage into consideration, one can already notice some of the prejudices faced by the members of the Arab-American communities around the United States. Although Oskar does not consider himself to be a racist, he directly expresses, as we can see in the quote above, his fears and hesitations towards "Arab people on the subway, … in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places" and "turbans." This, I would argue, is one of the aspects in which both Foer's and Halaby's novels converge, and that I will further detail and explore along this thesis.

Furthermore, as a way to cope with this overwhelming fear and paranoia, Oskar plays the tambourine. By doing so, the sound of the instrument soothes and calms him down. It, therefore, prevents his mind from entering into an almost uncontrollable and incessant cycle of inventing objects and imagining surreal situations. Additionally, Sascha Scheuren states that by playing the tambourine, Oskar gives "himself the rhythm he has lost after his father's death" (6). Oskar cannot understand how the loss of someone so important to him can be seen

by the world as something so ordinary. At the same time, that he tries to find meaning in it all, it is impossible for him to run away from mourning and grief.

Oskar tries to communicate with his mother and grandmother, but he simply does not know how, or even how to begin. He is desperately trying to find meaning and make sense of his loss. In his mind, it seems, there is nothing logical enough that would justify his father being killed in what he considered such a senseless attack. The aftermath is also nonsensical to him; how is his mother seemingly no longer grieving for her late husband and has so quickly found solace and comfort in Ron's friendship? How is his grandmother apparently okay with her son being taken away from them so abruptly? When discussing Oskar's reactions towards grief, Aaron DeRosa disagrees with Kristiaan Versluys when the latter comments on Oskar's being "emotionally numb to the point of autism", as the former believes that this is an oversimplification of the character's complex feelings (609). In my opinion, Oskar's grief is too much for him to handle and his "emotional numbness," as Versluys puts it, is exactly due to his complex feelings towards his father's death. Life and Death are not something simple for this young character to cope with, and the abruptness of how his life changed makes Oskar distance himself from his loved ones who also survived Thomas's death. Therefore, I would not oversimplify Oskar's emotions and grief.

When discussing the aspect of language and how an event such as 9/11 can affect one's ability to communicate after a traumatic event, Versluys quotes James Berger, who declares that there is "nothing adequate, nothing corresponding in language could stand for" an event of that magnitude. He also quotes Jenny Edkins when she discusses that the attacks were something "outside the bounds of language, outside the worlds we have made for ourselves" (2). Victor Jeleniewski Seidler even mentions that "9/11 was an event that was never supposed to happen: even if Hollywood could imagine" the attacks, "the reality was

beyond reason and imagination" (2). Thus, if something is unimaginable, unfathomable even, how could one begin to talk about it, especially when one is only 9 years old?

In the beginning of the novel, we discover that Oskar, using his ingenious mind, transformed his father's last message into a bracelet that he gave to his mother:

> As for the bracelet Mom wore to the funeral, what I did was I converted Dad's last voice message into Morse code, and I used sky-blue beads for silence, maroon beads for breaks between the letters, violet beads for breaks between the words, and long and short pieces of string between the beads for long and short beeps. (35)

Despite knowing that his mother would probably not understand the underlying meaning in her bracelet, making it was a way that Oskar found to try to communicate with her about the messages he had hidden from her, as he seems unable to actually express his feelings in words to her. At the same time, this is Oskar's way of letting his mother know about the existence of his late father's messages, as he replaced the family's answering machine as a way of preventing her mother from listening to them while keeping them only to himself. We can see Oskar trying to communicate his feelings throughout the novel, sometimes as subtle hints, mental outbursts of rage, or in moments such as this one, in which he codifies his feelings and message.

As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, while looking through his Dad's closet, Oskar finds a key inside an envelope with the name Black written on it. He feels alone and tries to find reason and closure for everything he has been feeling after he had found that key. Throughout his tireless search, he constantly relives the memory of what he calls "the worst day," which sometimes leads to his hurting himself, replaying his father's message left on the answering machine, and getting "heavy boots." Oskar is certain that by discovering the meaning of that key, he will be able to reconnect with his father, as well as not miss him so much and prove that he loves him.

During his search for the meaning of the key, which door it opens, and what it has to do with his father, Oskar cannot really address his trauma verbally. Although he explains a little bit of his history to the Blacks he encounters along his expedition, it is only in rare moments that he allows himself to talk about it and burst into an overwhelming verbal overflow of his feelings, his secrets, the messages, the key; in sum, about everything he is unable to communicate to his mother or grandmother.

Throughout the narrative, one can only perceive Oskar's trauma and how he deals with it through a routine of self-mutilation and preservation. On one hand, he forces himself to find meaning to the key; he forces himself to listen over and over to his late father's last messages; he hurts himself; he works tirelessly in his search; and he quits his extracurricular activities such as theater. On the other hand, he wants to get closer to his mom and his grandmother; he wants to share his burden and *heavy boots* with them. However, he does not know how; he cannot find the words for it, or how to even begin this conversation. Additionally, as Versluys describes, for one to cope with trauma, one has no other option but to explore the symbols one's culture possesses. He further states that "trauma leads to numbness, flashbacks, or nightmare" (3). Oskar certainly displays emotional numbness at times, however, to my mind; he does not demonstrate only his "emotional numbness" as Versluys would argue. His constant replaying his father's messages and overthinking of how one could have survived the attacks are his flashbacks, and, I would even argue, they are also his nightmares. Thus, Oskar's reaction to his father's passing is much more complex than simply being numb by trauma.

Moreover, Versluys quotes Pierre Janet's ideas on narrative memory. Oskar is trapped in a standstill, and he cannot free himself from his memories, while he is caught in an endless string of inventing things and reliving his traumatic experience (3). Furthermore, Versluys states that "a trauma is deemed to be unsayable," and that when one talk about it, this can be

seen as a "reduction of its irreducible atrocity," making the traumatic experience something more controllable (11). Therefore, perhaps, if Oskar, and even his grandparents (whose traumas are not at the center of this thesis, although they are extremely relevant to the book's narrative), had found a way to express their traumas, their experiences could then be something less imponent and grasping in all of the three characters' lives.

In the article "Melancholy and Mourning in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*," Sien Uytterschout and Kristiaan Versluys discuss the idea that a "traumatic event is often so violent and disruptive . . . that it cannot be fitted into existing referential frameworks" (217). They state that due to the nature of a traumatic event, the survivors cannot fully comprehend the extension of what had happened, and therefore, "through the paradoxical workings of dissociation" they do not fully register the event into their memories, nor can they remove it from their memory completely. Moreover, the authors mention that since 1980, dissociation has been officially recognized under the denominator of Post-Traumatic-Stress Disorder (PTSD) (217). Oskar, while struggling to cope with his loss, shows clear signs of dissociation, as he does not comprehend entirely what had happened to him, and at the same time he cannot simply forget about it.

Uytterschout and Versluys, when discussing Pierre Janet's ideas, mention that the "traumatized people have to learn to express themselves and try to fit their experience into a larger, coherent whole" (218). By searching for the key, Oskar, in my understanding, is trying his best to find coherence once more. Although he cannot clearly express himself, he believes that the missing pieces in his life lie in finding what that key had to do with his father, and then, being close to him a little bit longer. By looking for the lock, Oskar is trying to complete a puzzle of his father. His search for the lock is his search for people who might have met his father. As Uytterschout and Versluys mention, in the same way that Thomas Schell Sr is constantly trying to sculpture Anna back to life, Oskar, despite being disappointed with the

meaning of the key, found solace in knowing that William Black had indeed met his father and discovered that Mr. Black remembered who his father was (232).

To make meaning and to have his father be someone worth being remembered is something of extreme importance to Oskar. When meeting his neighbor, old Mr. Black, Oskar learns that Mr. Black believes that everyone could be summarized into one word, and he has a card for everyone he believes he might need to reference one day. While looking through Mr. Black's cards, Oskar is saddened by the fact that, as Mr. Black had never met, and therefore needed to reference Oskar's father, there was no card for him. Oskar argues with Mr. Black that his father should be there, because if he were there, he would be bibliographically significant. Discovering that his father might have not been "bibliographically significant" gave him even "heavier boots:" "Dad wasn't a Great Man, not like Winston Churchill, whoever he was. Dad was just someone who ran a family jewelry business. Just an ordinary dad. But I wished so much, then, that he *had* been Great" (159). This realization of his father's seeming unimportance is something too heavy for Oskar to deal with. The boy is struggling to cope with his father's passing and cannot process very well how someone so important to him can at the same time be so "irrelevant" to the world.

How could the world mourn someone who was insignificant? How is everyone in his family not mourning Thomas's death more? Granted that he was indeed just another regular person in the world; in other words, a "bibliographically insignificant" person, Oskar was still reluctant to face the rather insignificance of one's death, especially when that person was one of the most important ones in, if not his whole, world. Although I have been constantly mentioning here Oskar's search for the lock, this is the most important aspect to this analysis: by searching for it, I believe, Oskar is also searching for his father's significance in the world. Oskar is searching for the impact his father might have had on whoever owned that key. As it was mentioned above, when finally discovering whose key it was, Oskar almost interrogates

William Black hopelessly expecting a thorough description of his father. Sadly; however, when finding what the key really was, whose key it was, and what lock it opened, Oskar is faced with the greatest insignificance of all: the key and the lock had nothing to do with his late father.

Right after leaving William Black's office, Oskar meets his grandfather, with whom he was planning to dig his father's grave up. Because Oskar was late, Thomas Schell Sr asks him where he was, to which he replies: "I found [the key] and now I can stop looking? I found it and it had nothing to do with my Dad? I found it and now I'll wear heavy boots for the rest of my life?" (302). The whole pointlessness and meaninglessness of the key is just another disappointment Oskar cannot fully comprehend. Both grandson and grandfather decide then to unearth Thomas's grave and follow through with their plan.

It is now, at the end of the narrative, as mentioned in the previous section, that Oskar can finally open up to his mother and express his feelings. According to Uytterschout and Versluys, although the key did not bring him closer to his father, it did bring him closer to his mother, "from whom he was becoming estranged" (234). Oskar then discovers that his mother knew about all of his moves: his quest, where he was every weekend, his father's messages on the answering machine, etc. Although the novel comes to an end without a clear resolution to Oskar's trauma, which I believe is something which will take a long time, we do find an Oskar with his boots a little bit lighter; one who finally manages to break free from the language barrier he had with his mother.

As Uytterschout and Versluys mention, "whereas in the beginning Oskar had more in him of a melancholic, he now becomes more of a mourner" (233). He promises his mother to "be better soon" and to be "happy and normal" (323). Oskar also allows his mother to fall in love again, to which she says she will never fall in love again, and Oskar replies "I want you

to" (324-5). Oskar is showing his first signs of wanting to move on with his life and finding meaning in it again: he can now finally start to mourn his father's death.

2.2. Trauma and Rage: Oskar's Outbursts of Anger

Oskar, in his internal search for meaning for his father's death, cannot really cope with all his feelings. As Uytterschout and Versluys discuss it, "Oskar's selective inability to testify to his (traumatic) experiences goes hand in hand with his fits of rage" (231). These fits are not specifically directed at anyone, but rather at everyone. Oskar is angry at the world for allowing such tragedy to happen and, as a result, for allowing his father to die. Moreover, Oskar is mad at the world for not mourning his father's death accordingly.

At the beginning of his expedition, while visiting Aaron Black, Mr. Black's complete disregard and impatience while talking to Oskar through the intercom made Oskar want to "press all of the buttons and scream curse words at everybody who live in the stupid building" (90). Additionally, Oskar said that although he "wanted to give [him]self bruises," he "stood up and pressed 9E again" instead (90). It was not uncommon for him to want to bruise himself whenever he felt disappointed or angry during his expedition, as well as when he missed his father extremely and could not stop inventing things to occupy his mind.

On one specific afternoon, Oskar tells his grandmother that he would like to start a stamp collection. The next afternoon, his grandmother comes with three albums for him, from which she had removed the plate block, as she believed it was worthless and not necessary. Oskar "felt [him]self starting to spaz, even though [he was] trying not to," but he does not manage to hold his emotions and simply dismisses his grandmother effort to please him. She tells him that she will go back to the stamp shop the following day to get new albums, to which Oskar says that there is no need to get another one, at the same time "wanting to take back the last few things [he] said . . ., being nicer this time, being a better grandson" (104-05).

Although he demonstrates anger, he also understands that this type of behavior is not acceptable, and it is considered rude and disrespectful.

Towards the middle of the novel, Oskar's school's version of *Hamlet* begins its run. During the first night, Oskar's mother, Ron and Oskar's grandmother came to the show. On the second night, Ron was not there, and from the third night on, only Oskar's grandmother came to the play. During some nights, some of the Blacks Oskar had visited also came to watch him as Yorick, whose skull is the famous skull Hamlet holds in his hand. During one specific night, Oskar, under the skull mask, felt "incredibly close to everything in the universe, but also extremely alone." Oskar then wonders, for the first time, what is the meaning and worth of living: "what *exactly* made it worth it? What's so terrible about being dead forever, and not feeling anything, and not even dreaming? What's so great about feeling and dreaming?" (145). Oskar's reflections, which are somewhat suicidal and fatalist, lead him fantasize an extremely angry improvisation in the play towards the class bully, who played Hamlet:

> ME. Alas, poor Hamlet [*I take* JIMMY SNYDER*'s face into my hand*]; I knew him, Horatio.
>
> JIMMY SNYDER. But Yorick … you're only … a skull.
>
> ME. So what? I don't care. Screw you.
>
> . . .
>
> ME. On behalf of the dead … [*I pull the skull off my head. Even though it's made of papier-mâché it's really hard. I smash it against* JIMMY SNYDER*'s head, and I smash it again . . .*]. (145-46)

His sense of the meaningless of living and dying, and whether it was in fact worth all the struggle and difficulty one must go through to be alive, only fuels his imaginary rage:

> *And nothing else makes any sense.* DAD *doesn't make sense.* MOM *doesn't make sense.* THE AUDIENCE *doesn't make sense. The folding chairs and fog-machine don't make sense. Shakespeare doesn't make sense. The stars that I know are on the side of the gym ceiling don't make sense. The only thing that makes sense right is my smashing* JIMMY SNYDER'*s face.* (146)

His rage continues when he mentally confronts the skulls of his mother's supposedly moving on with her life, and seemingly forgetting about her late husband; the skull of Ron, who is letting Oskar's mother move on with her life; the skull of his grandmother's embarrassing him every night; and the skull of his therapist, Dr. Fein, asking him if any good could come out of his father's death. At the end of his mental rage outburst, Oskar envisions the audience "giving [him] a standing ovation," as they thank him, saying that they love him and that they will always protect him (146). When his imaginary rage comes to an end, Oskar then imagines that if he could have actually done it, if he could have indeed achieved vindication against his class bully, "it would have been great," (147) and maybe, life would have then been a bit more meaningful and fair at that moment in his life. Furthermore, it is only through this imaginary violent act that Oskar believes to be finally making sense of his feelings.

On Tuesday afternoons, Oskar has to go to his therapist, Dr. Fein. He does not understand why he has to have therapy, as he believes that "you *should* wear heavy boots when your dad dies, and if you *aren't* wearing heavy boots, *then* you need help" (200). When Dr. Fein asks him why he believes he is there to see him, Oskar simply replies that his mom is upset that he is "having an impossible time with [his] life," as he believes life is impossible in itself, and that he is "constantly emotional." When asked if he was emotional at that moment, he simply confirmed and said that he was feeling all of the emotions he could feel: "sadness, happiness, anger, love, guilt, joy, shame, and a little bit of humor" (201).

Dr. Fein then asks him if his "emotionalness" affects his life, to which Oskar simply replies that it almost hinders his life completely, as he is often crying in private, has a hard time going to school, and cannot even sleep over at any of his friend's house because he gets panicky being away from his mother, to which he adds that he is "not good with people" (201). Dr. Fein then asks Oskar if he has noticed any changes in his body, as he believes that this emotional roller-coaster is due to his going through early puberty, to which Oskar simply says he is feeling self-conscious about this question. Oskar also adds that the real reason why he is extremely emotional is the fact that his father "died the most horrible death that anyone ever could invent" (201). As it has been discussed, as a way to try to deal with his grief, Oskar is constantly inventing new objects, some of them even to help people, like the birdseed suit, in case of an attack like the ones in New York. Therefore, in his opinion, even if someone could invent the worst things in the world, such death would be by far the most horrible one.

It is worth discussing here Oskar's emotional awareness and complexity. As mentioned before, he is an extremely intelligent and curious nine-year-old. Therefore, it comes to us, readers, as a surprise, that such young narrator displays not only such complex array of emotions, but also is fully aware of them. As it was briefly discussed in the section before, Versluys describes Oskar as being "emotionally numb;" however, this scene, in my opinion, proves the exact opposite. I could agree with Versluys when he argues that Oskar's complex feelings actually makes him not feel anything; nonetheless, I would argue that Oskar is in fact "overfeeling" and that is exactly he reason why he might be seen as being numb. Oskar's feelings are so diverse, intense and simultaneous that he is unable to process them individually, resulting in a false sense of being emotionally numb.

Here, it is worth discussing the word "invent" used by him. As a way to deal with his loss and process his grief, Oskar is constantly inventing objects, some which could have even been useful in avoiding that the victims from the terrorist attacks would have been killed, such

as a birdseed suit, which the victims could have worn to have been "rescued" by birds which would come to eat the seeds embedded in the suit. Perhaps, if such inventions as this, or maybe even others, had been invented before the planes hit the towers, a terrible death such as his father's would have never been "invented."

Dr. Fein then moves on to play a little game of free association with Oskar. He will say a word and Oskar has to say the first thing that comes to his mind. During this exercise, there are some answers worth mentioning, such as uncomfortable/extremely; hurt/realistic, home/where the stuff is; emergency/dad. Dr. Fein then asks if his father is the cause or the solution to the emergency, to which he replies "both." The last word used in the game was happiness. Oskar, at first, could not think of anything related to happiness. After some insisting by Dr. Fein, Oskar simply replies "I'm feeling self-conscious" (202). Here I would also like to comment on a possible word play Foer uses in the narrative: Dr. Fein and the last name Black. Dr. Fein's last name has the same pronunciation of the word "fine," therefore, by seeking his help, Oskar is supposed to get/be fine after his therapy sessions. The last name Black is also relevant, as when we mourn someone, we are expected, in certain societies or cultures, to be wearing black clothes. By searching for the key and visiting the many Blacks along his quest, Oskar is mourning and processing his grief, all the while trying to get closer to his father and honor his memory.

How is Oskar supposed to associate anything with happiness after his father's death? In his mind, this was simply something impossible for him to do, which is probably one of the reasons why he does not understand when his mother is happy talking, playing games and drinking wine with Ron in their apartment living room. How could she be happy, and perhaps even how could he have a word or expression to free associate with "happiness" when all he feels are his "heavy boots?"

At the end of the session, Dr. Fein assigns him a task: Oskar would have to plan how to be better the following week. The way Oskar said he would accomplish this is by burying all of his feelings deep inside of him, to which he said:

> No matter how much I feel, I'm not going to let it out. If I have to cry, I'm going to cry on the inside. If I have to bleed, I'll bruise. If my heart starts going crazy, I'm not gonna tell everyone in the world about it. It doesn't help anything. It just makes everyone's life worse (203).

Oskar is certain that by suppressing all of his feelings and not communicating them to his family or friends, he is actually making everyone's life better. The burden of having to carry his father's last messages; the responsibility of discovering what the key opens and what it has to do with his father; the affliction of having to move on with his life, what he believes it would mean forgetting his father; all of it, he believes, is his obligation and no one else's. At the same time, he believes that everyone in his family should also be wearing heavy boots. Therefore, despite not sharing his *Angsts* with his mother and grandmother, it is unfathomed to him how they are not with heavier, or at least as heavy as, boots as he is.

Before leaving the session, Dr. Fein asks Oskar if he thinks that "any *good* can come from [his] father's death;" in a mental response, Oskar goes into a raging fit: "I kicked over my chair, threw his papers across the floor, and hollered, 'No! Of course not, you fucking asshole!'" Despite being what Oskar wanted to say and do, he replied to him by simply shrugging his shoulders (203). Again, burying his feelings might not have been so productive. Oskar could have expressed his anger and disbelief with a question he deemed completely absurd. Throughout the novel, Oskar frequently hides his feelings; however, whenever they are simply too much for him to handle, he bursts into fits of anger, both real and mentally, as well as he bursts into an unstoppable stream of words. Sometimes, as a result of Oskar's inability to cope with his anger and frustration, he also bruises himself.

Another short, yet very significant, episode of rage happened when old Mr. Black decided not to continue going on with Oskar in his quest for the key. The chapter itself foreshadows Oskar's feelings with its title of "Alive and Alone" (234). After six and a half months searching together with Mr. Black, Oskar found himself alone again. He tells us that his "boots were the heaviest they'd ever been," and mentions that he "couldn't to talk to [his] Mom, obviously, and even though Toothpaste and The Minch were [his] best friends, [he] couldn't talk to them either" (234). After visiting Ruth Black, who lived on top of the Empire State Building, old Mr. Black decides it is time for him to stop searching for the key with Oskar. When telling the little boy about his decision, he hopes Oskar would understand it. Mr. Black is extremely grateful for the time they spent together, which resulted in his leaving his apartment for the first time in years and rejoining society and the world. However, despite it all, he felt it was time for him to stop. He opened his hand, waiting for Oskar's handshake, when the boy mentally envisages his reaction:

> I told him, "I don't understand."
>
> I kicked his door and told him, "You're breaking your promise."
>
> I pushed him and shouted, "It isn't fair!"
>
> I got on my tiptoes and put my mouth next to his ear and shouted, "Fuck you!" (254)

Instead, a dissatisfied Oskar simply shook his hand. I would like to discuss his use of the word "fair" in this situation. For Oskar, his father's death is far from being fair, and the world around him now revolves into numerous unfair situations of which he has no control. On the one hand, it is not fair that Mr. Black could simply leave a nine-year-old to look for a key all by himself, even though he had begun this expedition alone. It is also not fair that he has to deal with all his emotions and not being able to talk to anyone about it. On the other hand, much of Oskar's unfairness comes from his own relationship with his trauma. What makes it

impossible for him to talk to his mother, for example? Simply speaking, there was nothing preventing this sort of communication. Oskar's inability to express verbally his trauma, his fears and his emotions will be dealt with in detail in the following section of this chapter.

Before moving further in the discussion, there is still one more rage outburst worth mentioning: Oskar's towards his mother. Differently from the others, when confronting his mother, Oskar does not do it mentally, rather, he does it quite vocally and rashly. If it were possible, I would quote the whole scene which takes places from pages 168 to 173. However, as this would be an extremely long and impractical quote, bear with me in this perhaps fairly long summary of the scene.

At one specific night, right after being tucked into bed, Oskar asks his mother to promise him not to bury him. He claims that even though he is very brave, he simply could not spend eternity in a small box under the earth, and asks for "one of those mausoleum-thingies." Oskar believes that as a way for her to prove her love for him, she needs to promise him that she will not bury him, should he die before her. His mother clearly does not want to discuss this subject and tells him that he will not die soon, to which he replies that his father also thought the same thing before dying. She then asks her son if he would not like to be next to her and her late husband when he died. "Dad isn't even there!" is what Oskar replies. He expresses his inability to understand how people kept pretending to believe that his father was there, when in fact, they simply buried an empty box. His mother says that his spirit and memory are there, to which Oskar says that he had no spirit; "he had cells, and now they're on rooftops, and in the river, and in the lungs of millions of people around New York, who breathe him every time they speak" (169). Moreover, he says that his father's memory was not in a box buried six feet under; it was there with him, in his head.

His mother then says that Oskar is "getting out of control," and being "illogical." Oskar confronts her and says that the fact that his father is dead does not mean that he cannot

say the truth, and it was not a reason for him to be illogical. His mother tries to calm him down, and Oskar says “fuck you” and “screw you” to his mother. “You need a time-out!” his mom says, to which he replies, “I need a mausoleum!”

Oskar then confronts her by asking where she was on the worst day, and why she was not at home, or why she did not pick him up from school that day like the other mothers did. She explains that she believed it would be faster and better for him to go home, and that she would go directly home to him. Oskar then tells her that she should have made the impossible possible. “I can’t make the impossible possible,” she replies, as she starts to cry.

As a way to break the tension and try to make the situation light again, and for her to love him again, Oskar started to think of “some ways to be hilarious, because [he] thought that maybe if [he] was hilarious, she wouldn’t be mad at [him] anymore and [he] could be safe again” (170). Oskar then tells his mother that he misses his father. She says she misses him too. Oskar then questions “but do you *really*?” because he hears her laughing and had never seen her cry. She then affirms that she does cry for her late husband and does not want Oskar to see her cry: “I’m trying to find ways to be happy. Laughing makes me happy,” she says. Oskar then tells his mother that *he* is “not trying to find ways to be happy,” and that he *won’t* do it either, because he believes that his father would want Oskar to remember him, instead of being happy. “Why can’t you remember him *and* be happy?” his mother questions him.

“Why are you in love with Ron?” Oskar asks his mother. She explains that she is not in love with him, and that they are just friends, and that things are “more complicated than they seem.” A yet again unreasonable Oskar asks his mother to promise him never to fall in love again, and if she does not do it, he will stop loving her. “You’re not being fair.” “I don’t have to be fair! I’m your son!” Again, Oskar’s use of the word *fair*. Nothing seems to be fair

for him anymore. As his father's death was something completely unfair, he reserves himself his right to also be unfair to the world.

At the climax of his feelings of unfairness and anger about his father's death, Oskar tells his mother that "if [he] could have chosen, [he] would have chosen [her]!" Right after saying these words, Oskar felt ashamed and afraid that his words were mixed with his father's cells that he "might have inhaled when [they] went to visit Ground Zero." His mother simply stood up, left the room and carefully closed Oskar's bedroom door. "I take it back," Oskar said trying to make amends for his hurtful words. "You can't take something like that back." Oskar then tries to apologize, and his mother tells him that she does not know whether she could accept it or not. Oskar asks she is still mad at him. "I was never mad at you," she said. "What were you?" Oskar asks. "Hurt" his mother replies (172).

Throughout this whole passage, Oskar leads us into his "feelings book" and changes his feelings from "DESPERATE" to "MEDIOCRE", and then to "OPTIMISTIC, BUT REALISTIC", which then changes to "EXTREMELY DEPRESSED," developing into "INCREDIBLY ALONE," and ending up with:

> I GUESS I FELL ASLEEP ON THE FLOOR. WHEN I WOKE UP, MOM WAS PULLING MY SHIRT OFF TO HELP ME GET INTO MY PJS, WHICH MEANS SHE MUST HAVE SEEN ALL OF MY BRUISES. I COUNTED THEM LAST NIGHT IN THE MIRROR AND THERE WERE FORTY-ONE. SOME OF THEM HAVE GOTTEN BIG, BUT MOST OF THEM ARE SMALL. I DON'T PUT THEM THERE FOR HER, BUT STILL I WANT HER TO ASK ME HOW I GOT THEM (EVEN THOUGH SHE PROBABLY KNOWS), AND TO FEEL SORRY FOR ME (BECAUSE SHE SHOULD REALIZE HOW HARD THINGS ARE FOR ME), AND TO FEEL TERRIBLE (BECAUSE AT LEAST SOME OF IT IS HER FAULT), AND TO PROMISE ME THAT SHE WON'T DIE AND LEAVE ME ALONE. BUT SHE

> DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING. I COULDN'T EVEN SEE THE LOOK IN HER EYES WHEN SHE SAW THE BRUISES, BECAUSE MY SHIRT WAS OVER MY HEAD, COVERING MY FACE LIKE A POCKET, OR A SKULL (172-73).

This verbal and angry outburst towards his mother is mostly, in my opinion, a result of his incapacity to express his feelings and communicate them to his mother. While trying to process his loss and trauma, Oskar bruises himself 41 times, which, according to Uytterschout and Versluys, is Oskar's way of turning "his violence and aggression towards himself," whenever he wears extremely heavy boots or is particularly disappointed (231). Also, during his sessions with Dr. Fein, as mentioned above, Oskar states that expressing his feelings would help no one and would, in fact, make everything more difficult. Therefore, by bruising himself, he finds a momentary outlet for his anger, pain, disappointment and sorrow without having to verbally externalize his feelings. Seidler states that Oskar is "plagued by survivor's guilt" (100), and I believe that this guilt is the biggest source for his anger (100). Oskar is so angry with his father's abrupt death that he simply does not understand why he is alive, why it can be fair, or even why it is okay to move on and be happy without feeling guilty; without resulting in his not loving his father, or even, perhaps, meaning that he now loves him less.

2.3. Trauma and Its Effect on Language: On not Being Able to Communicate

Throughout his novel, Foer provides the reader with three narratives of three people broken by traumatic events. We first begin with Oskar's account, then we move to his grandfather's, and finally get to hear his grandmother's voice. Versluys suggests that "none of these voices is natural or normal," and that the whole family is so traumatized by what had happened to them that "utterance is no longer possible," and that language itself is "strained to a breaking point." Versluys further comments that the "novel is the narrative of grief" (80). These

remarks are of paramount importance to the analyses of how the Schells deal with their trauma and grief in terms of language.

Despite not being the focus point of this research, in this section, it is worth discussing a bit further how Oskar's grandparents deal with trauma. As I have mentioned before, I truly believe that, although they are clearly traumatized by the violent and sudden way their son died during the terrorist attacks, Oskar's grandparents carry with them previous trauma after their German hometown Dresden was bombed during World War II, resulting in their loss of absolutely everything and, most importantly, everyone, his family and especially Anna, his greatest love. To make matters worse, they also demonstrate signs of "survivor's guilt," as they were the sole survivors in their family. Oskar's grandmother lost her house, her parents, and her beloved sister, Anna. Similarly, Thomas Schell Sr also lost his whole family and the love of his life, his wife's sister Anna.

I will start with the discussion of Oskar's grandfather's trauma. We are allowed to know in the beginning of the novel that Thomas Schell Sr gradually and slowly began losing his ability to speak. In a letter to his unborn son, Thomas Sr describes the first time he noticed he had begun losing his ability speak, which was at a restaurant in the United States, soon after he had moved from Germany:

> I haven't always been silent, I used to talk and talk and talk and talk, I couldn't keep my mouth shut, the silence overtook me like a cancer, it was one of my first meals in America, I tried to tell the waiter, "The way you handed me that knife, that reminds me of –" but I couldn't finish the sentence, her name wouldn't come, I tried again, it wouldn't come, she was locked inside me, how strange, I thought, how frustrating, how pathetic, how sad . . . (16)

It is important to discuss the significance of what triggered his gradual and slow loss of language: the death of Anna. We understand throughout the novel that Anna was the only

woman he really loved, and his decision to marry Anna's sister was not based on love, but rather on the hopeless desire to sculpture his wife into Anna. The idea and memory of Anna was, as he mentions, "locked inside" him; however, it could no longer be expressed into words. He further mentions in his letter that the second word he lost was "and" and that words such as: want, come, fine, shame, carry, daybook, pencil, pocket change, wallet, and even the word "loss" itself were lost (16-17). He started even to lose whole chunks such as "thank you." At first, he mentions that he tried different ways of expressing what he desired. When he needed to say "and" he would say "ampersand," to say "thank you" he would say "That thing that comes before 'you're welcome,'" as well as he would try to use synonyms, such as "desire" when he had already lost the word "want." Additionally, it is worth to briefly discuss the letters Thomas Schell Sr wrote to his unborn child and continued to write him even after he was born. They are the materializations of the words he is unable to say to him. Thomas only manages to "express" his feelings and "communicate" with his son when he and Oskar fill Thomas's coffin.

Thomas Schell Sr then started to carry with him a notebook in which he would write sentences such as: "I want two roll," "And I wouldn't say not to something sweet," "I'm sorry, this is the smallest I've got," among other sentences (19-21). He would even write "start spreading the news…" to express his desire to sing (22). He would also either write a whole new sentence depending on the context, or he would try to use one of the sentences he had already written that day which would best suit the moment. To make his communication easier, he even had the words "no" and "yes" tattooed in his right and left hands, respectively.

Before the bombings, Oskar's grandmother asked everyone she knew to write her a letter, including Anna's boyfriend, Thomas, who would eventually become her husband. In his letter, Thomas tells her that he wants "to be a sculptor," and marry her sister. He adds that "those are [his] only dreams," and that he could write more, "but that is all that matters" (80).

Losing Anna, the love of his life, was such a traumatic event that it slowly led him into complete silence. Therefore, I would like to argue that such loss resulted in the death of a part of him, as he starts his letter to his unborn child saying that he was extremely talkative before and it was exactly the memory of Anna which triggered his gradual descend into silence.

In his review of the novel, Wyatt Mason states that the Schells are left just "as hollowed out by loss" as their last name would suggest (5). The homophonic relation between their last name and the word *shell* is not a mere coincidence. Trauma made these characters empty, desperately trying to survive into a chaotic and seemingly meaningless world.

Similarly to her husband, Oskar's grandmother was also a livelier person before the Dresden bombings:

> When I was a girl, my life was music that was always getting louder. Everything moved me. A dog following a stranger. That made me feel so much. A calendar that showed the wrong month. I could have cried over it. I did. Where the smoke from a chimney ended. How an overturned bottle rested at the edge of a table. (180)

However, after having been touched by loss and death, she "spent [her] life learning to feel less" (180). Losing her sister also meant losing the person she loved the most. When writing to her grandson, Oskar's grandmother talks about the love she felt for her late sister Anna, as she remembers the day she asked her sister what it felt like to kiss. When Anna was trying to explain it to her sister, she decided to kiss her, about which Oskar's grandmother writes in the letter: "I had never felt so in love in my life, and I have not felt so in love since" (182).

In my opinion, both of Oskar's grandparents were desperately seeking Anna in their relationship; holding on to the last piece of memory they had of her. However, this search led to their creation of "something" and "nothing" places in their apartment. The former are places where they could exist and talk to each other, whereas when one of them were in the

latter, they were to be considered invisible and non-existing. Gradually, the "nothing" places started to dominate their relationship and apartment. When Oskar's grandmother became pregnant, a broken Thomas decides to leave his expecting wife, as he could not bear the thought of having a child.

Before the bombings, Anna tells Thomas that she is pregnant, and he is "overjoyed." Today, in hindsight, he realizes that he "should have known not to trust it," as, according to him, "one hundred years of joy can be erased in one second" (215). That was the last day Thomas would see Anna. When Oskar's grandparents decided to marry, they promised they would not have children; therefore, his wife becoming pregnant not only broke their agreement, but it also made Thomas scared. As he tells Oskar, "life is scarier than death," (322) and being a father, living, being happy, it was all simply overwhelmingly terrifying for him to handle.

His decision to leave his wife was understood through no words. It was a look, it was a feeling, it was the sensation of being left behind. Again, there is a lack of verbal communication, despite conveying the idea of abandonment using other ways of communicating. Oskar's grandmother followed her husband to the airport, where he was about to leave, and confronted him. In their desperate way to communicate to each other, they argued whether they and their relationship were "nothing" or "something," although neither argued whether they loved each other (184). That day, Thomas went back home with his wife, only to leave her again the next day. Oskar's grandmother then frees all of their pet animals and erases all of her estranged husband's writings left behind. By the time Oskar's father was born, there was no longer any sign of his father's existence in their apartment.

For both of them, losing language does not only necessary mean losing the actual ability to talk, as in Thomas's case. It means not being able to communicate with each other and express their true feelings. Oskar's grandmother, for instance, when dealing with Oskar,

cannot explicitly tell him how much her life revolves around her grandson. Although she mentions throughout her letter how much she loves him, it is only at the end that she reaches the conclusion that it is always necessary to tell the person we love that we love them, and she closes the letter with a simple "I love you" (314).

To sum up the discussion of Oskar's grandparents' inability to communicate, I would like to mention the ideas put forth by Ilka Saal in her article "Regarding the Pain of Self and Other: Trauma Transfer and Narrative Framing in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*." According to the author, Thomas Schell Sr's unsent letters to his son, as well as Oskar's grandmother's attempts to type her life story without putting a ribbon in the typewriter, resulting in a great number of blank pages only legible by herself, represent the "characters' great urgency to communicate," as their letters and memoirs only "convey the impossibility of communicating their traumatic past" (458). Oskar's outbursts of rage, for example, are the outlets he found for his bottled-up feelings together with his constant bruising of himself. According to Saal, when she quotes Elain Scarry, "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it" (453). By hurting himself, Oskar manages to break the need to formulate and process his pain and trauma through language and narrative, thus making it even harder for him to communicate his feelings.

Moreover, Saal author affirms that "the reconstruction of language is therefore essential not only for the purpose of giving testimony to pain and suffering but also for healing" (453). The author, however, compares Oskar's narrative with his grandparents', stating that Oskar manages, progressively throughout the novel, to "work through his trauma and to regain a strong sense of self," whereas his grandparents' "voices merely record the very failure of self endeavor, their entrapment in perpetual melancholia" (457). This is an important aspect to be mentioned, as Oskar's ability to start healing and process his grief sets

him free from his guilt to be alive, whereas his grandparents are stuck in a constant state of mourning.

It is also worth discussing again Oskar's inability to talk about "the worst day." Instead, he is trapped in the constant replay of his father's last messages; in the incessant need to invent things as a way to stop thinking about whether the falling man was in fact his father or not; and in his need to bruise himself. In the introduction to her "Trauma: Exploration in Memory," Cathy Caruth states that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event" (4-5). Therefore, by constantly replaying his father's messages, obsessing whether the falling man in the picture he found online was his father or not, discovering how he died, and inventing as a way to "dull" his brain, Oskar is further traumatizing himself. Moreover, as he is unable to break his unspeakable cycle and start to form the necessary language to express his trauma, which is, as abovementioned, paramount to the healing process, Oskar is stuck in a constantly traumatic mental state.

I would like to mention a specific night as an example, as there are various passages in which Oskar is trapped in the same cycle, Oskar is up past 4 am as he is constantly inventing and giving himself bruises. He then gets up and reaches for his grandmother through their walkie-talkie, and although she answers his call worried about him, he simply says "I'm OK. Over" (69). Clearly, Oskar is not okay; however, his inability to communicate his feelings hinders him from breaking his numerous vicious cycles of self-mutilation.

On the "worst day," as soon as he got home, Oskar heard his father's first four messages and felt like "running away and never talking to anyone again" (68). He then decides to run to the nearest electronic shop and buy the exact same answering machine. When he gets back home, he wraps the old machine, puts it inside a shopping bag, and then "put[s] that in a box, and [he] put[s] that in another box, and [he] put[s] that under a bunch of stuff in [his] closet" (68). Although Oskar's reasoning to do so is to protect his mother and not

allow her to ever hear those messages, by hiding the answering machine so well, Oskar is also hiding away his feelings deep inside of him into numerous “mental boxes”, which do not help him to express his grief. After all, for him to access those messages, for him to be in touch with his father one more time is extremely troublesome. Similarly, to be able to communicate and talk about it is just as difficult for him. Having to keep secrets from his family and having to lie about what he was doing would only gradually distance Oskar from his mother as he desperately tries to be closer to his father.

Oskar’s inability to verbalize his fears is not only a result of his father’s passing. As it has been mentioned here before, by the time Oskar arrived home from school, his father had already left four messages. When he called for the last time, Oskar was watching the towers on TV and had already realized that his father was beyond help: “I thought about rushing downtown to see if I could somehow rescue him myself. And then the phone rang. I looked at my watch. It was 10:22:27” (68). He was powerless and helpless when faced with his father’s last phone call. After almost two minutes of call, his father is then disconnected, and Oskar watches the tower collapse, bringing his father down with it.

It was at this exact moment that Oskar’s difficulty to express his feelings began. Throughout the novel we see a boy torn by the guilt of not having answered the phone to talk to his father one last time. We follow his (almost pointless) journey after a mysterious key inside a vase on the top shelf of this father’s closet, as he believes that by doing so, he is not only closer to his father, but also proving to his late father that he loves him. Oskar truly believes that he is supposed to wear “heavy boots” for the rest of his life, as moving on would mean forgetting his father, forsaking his memory and ultimately stop loving him. Thus, he does not understand his family’s attempt to try to live a normal life (the best way possible) and is constantly confronting his mother about her supposedly lack of grief for her late husband. However, by forcing himself into this mindset, he is constantly struggling with

putting his feelings and emotions into words, thus, working through his trauma, and trying to wear “lighter boots.”

3. Once Upon a Time: The Promises of an Unpromising Land.

"kan

ya ma kan

fee qadeem az-zamaan"

Halaby begins and closes her narrative with the words above used at the beginning of stories for children or fairytales: "once upon a time." Throughout the novel, the narrator interweaves a fairytale/folktale narrative to the main narrative, where we meet Jassim and Salwa, our two main characters, which according to the narrator, have "nothing and everything" to do with "what happened to the World Trade Center" (loc. 19-28). In the fairy tale narrative, we are told the story of a *ghula* who ties herself to a young maiden at the girl's birth. Throughout the maiden's life, the *ghula* pulls the threads which connect them and gets little by little closer to her. The *ghula* then lures the maiden into her layer with false promises so that the *ghula* could eat her.

Jassim is a Jordanian hydrologist, whose dream of using his skills to deal with the water crisis in the world verges utopia at times. Salwa, the "black sheep" of the family, the outsider, the American, was born in the US, and according to her father, she is "Palestinian by blood, Jordanian by residence, and American by citizenship" (70). Due to this mixed background, and to her exquisite taste, such as luxurious objects and silk pajamas, Salwa is sometimes deemed by her siblings as the different one.

Also important to the main narrative are the side narratives which introduce us to characters who will, somehow, enter in Jassim's and Salwa's lives. Such narratives also have the function of foreshadowing events, and it is exactly in the interweaving of the narratives that we, as readers, are able to see the greater picture, and how one simple action or incident

can generate uncontrollable ripple effects. Throughout the novel we see some of the ripples caused by the terrorist attacks on September 11, and how they affected Jassim's and Salwa's lives. Despite having taken place in the east coast, the ripples of the attacks echoed throughout the entire territory of the United States and worldwide. The attacks in Manhattan bear such weight and significance until now that we can even see the repercussion still in our present days.

The main narrative begins with an ordinary day in Jassim's and Salwa's lives, filled with promises, routine, expectations, and at the same time, a seemingly dullness of the American life and dream they were living in. Jassim wakes up in the morning, goes to the gym for his morning swim, counts his breaths, takes his shower there, enjoys his ride home in silence at the break of dawn, and spends some quality time with his wife in the morning before both have to go to work. This first glimpse of their lives is on the "day that changed everything" (4). It is also on this day that Jassim meets Jack Franks, a man whose daughter left everything, married a Muslim man from Jordan, converted and is now estranged from her family. Coincidently, Jack is a customer of Salwa's at the bank she works at, and while having a conversation in the shower at the gym, one that Jassim is rather uncomfortable with, Jack shares his thoughts on how beautiful Salwa and Arab women in general are.

We are then taken away from this glimpse of Jassim's routine, and are taken back to their house, where Salwa is questioning herself about her recent apparent "inability" to take her birth control, and whether she could rationalize her Lie; i.e. her decision not to take her birth control, but still tell Jassim she has been taking it. She let her pill fall through her fingers and run down the drain, which would then not make it a Lie anymore; she had forgotten to take it the day before, but today, she tried taking it, and it was accidently dropped. It is interesting to note that during this passage, and in some other moments throughout the narrative, Salwa's thoughts are in Arabic, which she considers to be her "language of thought

and intimacy" (9). She went back to her bed, lighter; after all, "the world was right again," and "the Lie was deflated." Now, in bed, Salwa finds a peaceful moment, and comforts herself in this peace that "would be scratched away within the hour by men whose culture was a first cousin to her culture, whose religion was her religion" (11).

Chapter Two takes us directly into a post-9/11 United States, and we can already notice changes in the characters' lives: Jassim is tormented by the images of the falling towers; when going out for his morning swim, he does not kiss his wife, as he usually did; inside the water, in his moment of tranquility and peacefulness, Jassim wraps his mind around the images of the burning falling towers, and questions what would lead someone to hijack a plane and do such a thing. In his naivety, he convinces himself "that they had wanted to hit the buildings but had not realized that they would destroy both structures in their entirety" (20). Their family called them, and as part of their naivety, Jassim and Salwa assured their relatives back in Jordan that they were far away from New York, and that they were safe. I use the term "naivety" here, as I believe the characters could not really predict, or even comprehend, how badly some Americans would now, as a result of the attacks, discriminate against Arabs, or Arab looking people.

When talking to his wife, Jassim even thought it was an absurd that Randa, an Arab friend of theirs, was worried about how her children would be treated now after 9/11, to which Jassim says: "why would anyone hurt Randa's kids? People are not so ignorant as to take revenge on a Lebanese family for the act of a few extremist Saudis who destroyed those buildings" (21). Salwa, contrary to her husband's naïve sense of safety, worries about what kind of retaliation could come from the government, especially for her husband, who worked directly with the city's water supply. Despite Jassim's unwillingness to entertain his mind in paranoid thoughts, after the attacks, he notices that some of his coworkers, who usually greet

him well, now seem to prefer to have a more “cautious” approach towards him, or even keep their distance.

As mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis, one powerful scene from the beginning of the novel, which, to my mind, sets the tone of how Jassim’s and Salwa’s lives will unravel throughout the narrative, takes us to the mall with them. A salesperson from one of the stores called security on Jassim simply due to the fact that he was looking at a motorcycle for some time. When Salwa confronted the girl responsible for calling security, the salesperson replies that she had lost her uncle in the Towers, to which Salwa asks her if she was then planning to call security on every Arab in the United States. Therefore, I believe that had the events on September 11 not happened, this mundane fact would not have caused any disturbance. How many people stopped in front of that same motorcycle to observe it, craved for it even, and did not have security called on them? Jassim and Salwa could now be seen as threats, as potential terrorists just by looking different, saying something odd, or even by vocalizing their opinion, even if their opinions were unrelated to religion or politics. Their lives were now on the spotlight of society, and there was no way to avoid it.

On the one hand, Salwa’s Lie and eventual pregnancy, as well as Jassim’s inability to continue with his routine is one of the factors that contribute to the unraveling of their relationship. Salwa finds herself pregnant and cannot seem to find the words to tell her husband, who supposedly does not to want to have children. She ends up having a miscarriage, and their lack of communication with each other strains heavily their relationship. On the other hand, Jassim’s accident resulting in a young teenager’s death is also left unsaid. Jassim burdens himself with guilt and is also unable to communicate this extremely important incident to his wife, which causes Jassim to distance himself even further from Salwa.

When the narrative throws us, the readers, back into the flashbacks, one can perceive that perhaps, although they care deeply for each other, Jassim and Salwa's marriage was not born out of love, but rather out of convenience. When Jassim asked Salwa to marry him, her reply was "I would like that very much. I would like to go to America too" (68). Salwa's desire to marry Jassim was very much based on her taste and desire for luxury, as her father describes her as having a mixed nationality (Palestinian, Jordanian and American), and it is exactly due to this mixture that she "has a taste for luxury," such as silk pajamas (70). At the same time, marrying Salwa was also something of extreme interest to Jassim, as he would like very much to be able to stay longer in the United States. After discovering that his future wife is an American citizen, Jassim even concludes that Salwa's American citizenship would enable them to stay in the US, forever even, if they wanted to. Despite this strategic marriage out of interest, both develop a form of care and, perhaps, even a form of love, as we can see throughout the novel how much Jassim is bothered, for example, when Frank talks about Salwa's beauty, or how much Salwa blames herself for lying to Jassim.

In the beginning of the novel, Jassim and Salwa are seen as two regular people living their regular American lives; however, the attacks on September 11 shake the whole nation's perspective on what is safe or dangerous, on what needs to be protected, and on what is part of a bigger "us" and "them."

3.1. Duality in Conflict: Being Arab American in a Post 9/11 USA in Halaby's Novel

Jassim and Salwa are seen in the beginning of the novel as displaying some form of acculturation, adopting much of the comfort and luxury of the American way of life. They live in a nice upper-middle class house, drive nice cars, indulge themselves with an expensive lifestyle, and seem not to worry about money. Such luxuries somewhat distance the characters from their homeland, Jordan: "Thankful for the luxury of living in a country where any kind

of food was minutes away, he got the pile of menus from a drawer beneath the counter and began picking through" (131). At the same time, they are left feeling homesick for food such as a good "coffee boiled away thousands of miles of homesickness" (283), or even roasted lamb with a "taste of home" (39). This duality in Jassim's and Salwa's characters – sometimes having more American, and sometimes more Arab habits - is portrayed in various moments throughout the novel.

Another important part of the characters' duality is the constant interchange of languages. According to Silke Dewulf, when faced with problems related to their American lives, Jassim and Salwa resort to English. On the other hand, when talking and confronting their personal problems, they do so in Arabic (50). Such linguistic conflict is challenging for both of them, when problems seem to be both "American" and/or "intimate." When trying to explain what had happened in the accident, Jassim struggles to find the correct words in English, and keeps translating back and forth in his mind from English to Arabic, and vice-versa, although he has been living in the United States for some years and is fully fluent in English. Salwa, when torn between her desire to be with Jake, a younger American coworker of hers, "demanded of herself in English, this being an American problem, an American situation. She promised herself to think about it only in English, even as her brain shouted at her in Arabic, cursed her with her mother's words" (175).

Dewulf claims that September 11 was an important event that redefined what it meant to be an Arab in the United States. She mentions Nadine Naber's pre-9/11 definition of the Arab community "as being invisible" in America (3), whereas in a post-9/11 America, quoting once again Lloyd's ideas mentioned in the Introduction, the attacks helped to remove the Arab-American community "out of the realm of the invisible" (1). Dewulf further states that a post-9/11 American society reinforces the idea of "living on the boundary" as the Arab Americans are viewed with "distrust due to the War on Terror." As a result, the Arab-

American community reacted and felt the "need to justify their position within American society which result[ed] in a feeling of dislocation and alienation from both their home and host country" (3).

When discussing the importance of understanding what an Arab and a Muslim are, Dewulf states that the former causes confusion as it "seems to incorporate both Muslim and Christian immigrants" (8). She further states the importance of being aware and using the correct term, as she quotes Suleiman's idea that people in general used the term Arab and Muslim interchangeably, without taking into consideration what it meant to be the former or the latter. Moreover, Suleiman explains that such definitions are highly broad and "composed of many distinct peoples or countries," and both terms are, nonetheless, "often seen by Americans as one 'people' and generally viewed in a negative light" (qtd. in Dewulf, 8-9). Furthermore, Dewulf mentions that this negative view is dependent on the political conflicts between the United States and the Arab world and mentions the Gulf and Arab-Israeli Wars as examples of these conflicts (9). This is an extremely paramount point, as the perception of what it is to be Arab American in a post 9/11 America is extremely negative due to the political and governmental efforts towards the War on Terror and the broadcasting of President Bush's agenda of "us against them," mentioned in the Introduction.

Dewulf also uses Pia Rebello Britto's distinction between the terms Muslim and Arab:

> The word *Arab* usually connotes people who are either from one of the 22 Arab States spanning from north Africa to the Middle East (Algeria, Bahrain, Comoro Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen) or whose ancestors come from this region, even though not everybody who comes from these countries is necessarily an Arab. It often entails having Arabic

> as a first or familial language. Muslims are followers of Islam, irrespective of ethnicity, sect, or language (9).

According to Britto's distinction, we can conclude that both Jassim and Salwa fit the two categories, therefore, they are Arabs and Muslims, even though Salwa was born in the US. Salwa's situation is a rather interesting one. Despite being American by birth, she is not seen by the people around her as being a "true" American. As stated by Dewulf, the fact that most people see Arabs and Muslims as being part of one large ethnic group "heightens the immigrants' awareness and difficulty of establishing an identity," which, I would argue, is one of the reasons Salwa is not seen as an American in the United States. On the other hand, it is also shown in the novel that Salwa does not consider herself a "true" American either, and has the urge to defend her position as an Arab in a post-9/11, as we can see, for example, when she confronts the salesgirl after she called the mall's security to Jassim:

> "Are you planning to have every Arab arrested now?" She paused for just a second. "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" (30).

Moreover, Salwa's decision to embark on a romantic involvement with Jake further complicates Salwa's identity and forces her to long to go "back to Jordan, with her family and her language and her predicable world" (176). While Salwa is conflicted by her position in the American society, Jassim sees himself as an immigrant, but does not demonstrate a desire to go back to Jordan. Furthermore, both display a high level of cultural assimilation and have very American lives and habits. However, such cultural assimilation was now extremely fragile in the United States, and in the world in general, after the terrorist attacks.

In their article, Roya Jabarouti and ManiMangai Mani mention that the trauma experienced after 9/11 did not only "threaten Americans," and that citizens in "over ninety

countries around the world" were also secondary casualties of the attacks, resulting in an alienation of Muslims (157). The authors further discuss how stressful and disturbing being stuck in a traffic jam or getting on a plane could be, resulting sometimes in shame and humiliation to some of the passengers, concluding that these highly documented and broadcast attacks "became the experience that continued to traumatize individuals and collectivities at both psychological and cultural level" (157). Throughout the novel, Jassim and Salwa are faced with extremely stressful and humiliating situations, in which their mere presence is questioned, as well as their reasons for living in the United States.

The authors also mention the discussion on whether psychological and cultural trauma are indeed related to each other, as they raise important questions such as: "Is cultural trauma the same as collective form of psychological trauma? When we speak of cultural trauma, should we really expect a catastrophic event to be actually experienced? Can the cultural trauma be worked out once and forever?" (qtd. in Jabarouti and Mani 158). To start this discussion, they mention Smelser's claims that "a collective trauma is established within a prolonged, contested process in a socio-culture that is historically and structurally vulnerable and prepared for the establishment of cultural trauma. When established, it exerts claims on the membership and the collective identity of the members" (158). Smelser adds that "the memory of the event needs to be established as culturally traumatic among the public. It means that it should associate the collective experience with a negative affect and be regarded as an indelible scar or a threat to the society's fundamental cultural values" (qtd. in Jabarouti and Mani 158).

On September 11, at the Barksdale Air Force Base, President Bush addressed the nation and mentioned various violated American national values, which, in my opinion, represent the indelible scars and threats to the society's fundamental cultural values:

> **Freedom** itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward. And freedom will be defended
>
> (…)
>
> Make no mistake, the United States will **hunt down and punish** those responsible for these cowardly acts
>
> (…)
>
> We have taken all appropriate -- appropriate security precautions to **protect the American people**
>
> (…)
>
> **Our military** at home and around the world is on high alert status. The resolve of our great nation is being tested, but make no mistake; **we will show the world that we will pass this test** (00:00:10-00:02:18).

The parts I highlighted above, in my opinion, represent some of these American national values which were defied by the terrorists when they attacked that day. First we have freedom, one of the pillars of the American society, as it is stated in the current American Pledge of Allegiance "one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." We then have the idea of the American prowess and military force, something that most Americans are proud of and respect. As a matter of fact, one could argue that the American freedom is highly connected to their military, as many Americans state that the liberty they have in the United States only exits due to the work of their military to protect them. Another point mentioned is protection: the American people need to be protected and all the necessary measures will be taken to achieve this goal. The final point touched by President Bush is the idea that 9/11 was a test, and the United States will not allow its enemies to perceive them as somewhat weak, and they "will pass this test." Thus, by touching on these extremely

calculated points, President Bush takes his first steps towards his War on Terror, which will lead to many changes in the American society and mentality.

But how exactly do Bush's speech and the social trauma resulting from the attacks affect Jassim and Salwa? According to Smelser, contrary to a psychological trauma, where the system in which trauma is going to be installed is the individual "personality," the system in which social trauma will be internalized is the network of social relations (qtd. in Jabarouti and Mani, 159). Therefore, by shaking the very core values and perceptions inside the American society, the terrorist attacks reshaped what it meant to be part of society in the United States; one which has always had "a widespread reputation for [its] multi-culturalism" (159).

The United States have always considered itself as "the land of the free and the home of the brave," as this is sung in their national anthem. Therefore, liberty, not only political, but also cultural and religious, has always been in the core of the American society, and in the center of the "American Dream." The direct victims in the World Trade Center, meaning, the people who were inside the buildings, were of 60 different countries and spoke 24 different languages (159). Hence, if we analyze this information, it is clear to see that the Americans were not the only victims of the attacks, as many other nationalities were also involved.

Jabarouti and Mani discuss the situation of Arabs and Muslims in a post-9/11 society, as they mention that a significant part of the Arab-Americans and Muslims living in the United States desired a "reunion with their families in their homeland, and not those whom they called 'strangers' in America" (159). This is a clear aspect present in Salwa's life, as she reassesses her position and life in the United States and questions whether she should go back to Jordan, even though she realizes that her desire to return home "had not included Jassim, [and] had left him in Tucson" (176). At the end of the novel, Jassim is surprised by a recent one-way ticket bought by Salwa for her to return to Jordan, without him.

Furthermore, as Jabarouti and Mani remark, before September 11, many Arab and Muslim Americans were still able to "enjoy the advantages of their citizenship," and that 9/11 was "a zero point in the history of America for all its citizens" (159). Additionally, they discuss Abu-Ras's claim that the Muslim American community suffered a "dramatic loss of identity and meaning," as well as "a tear in the social fabric," resulting in a struggling life in the United States, and the phenomenon of "Islamophobia" (159). Moreover, Fadda-Conrey mentions Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa's opinion on the direct connection between 9/11 and the political repercussions around the world after the attacks:

> Post-September 11, the invasion of Afghanistan, the extralegal treatment of Arab Americans, [and] the war on Iraq must be considered turning points not only for the community but also for the larger American public's awareness of this community's existence. Arab Americans could not try to engage the world and remain anonymous. (qtd. in Fadda-Conrey 59)

One could not simply be "invisible" anymore in the American society. After 9/11, the Arab-American community was forced to be under the spotlight of media, society and the world, resulting, as Fadda-Corey suggests, in a "blanket [of] representations that often portrayed them in a derogatory light," which in most cases are within the binary representation of us vs. them or patriotic vs unpatriotic (59). To my mind, Jassim's investigation falls under this largely broad definition of "us vs. them," which I will take up again in the following section.

3.2. Cultural Trauma and the Disturbance of Being an Arab after 9/11

When discussing the possible repercussions of an event such as 9/11, Christine Muller, a lecturer from Yale, mentions the butterfly effect – the metaphor used to explain chaos theory[4]

[4] Chaos theory was created by the American mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz.

– and says that a "butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil might contribute just enough to the atmospheric factors necessary to generate a Texas tornado" (5). However, she argues that 9/11 might be seen as exempt from chaos theory, as the devastation and impact of the attacks were witnessed by a large amount of people, all around the world, and at relatively the same time. Therefore, according to her, the world did not experience the flapping of the butterfly's wings, but the tornado. As mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis, the attacks in Manhattan were an event of global dimension leading to an international witnessing and global trauma. Muller mentions Schuster et alli's study, in which it was reported that on September 11, 98% of the adult population the United States watched at least one hour of the extensive media coverage of the attacks (x). Although the study only reports the hours spent watching the news regarding 9/11 in the United States, most of us can easily remember what we were doing that day and how much we actually followed about it on the news. Such extensive coverage and number of hours watched by each one of us can be argued to have helped to establish this global disruption and trauma.

Muller further states that "a traumatized victim occupies privileged status and is necessarily presumed to be uninvolved in the conditions generating his/her harm" (2). According to the literary theorist Birgit Däwes, the idea that 9/11 was the "day that changed everything" is problematic, as it conveniently excludes and silences the American imperialist tradition, as well it "revives the notion of American exceptionalism." Such exceptionalism, consequently, helped the American government to justify some of their "radical political moves" (qtd. in Muller 2). Muller also states that there was a reversal in ideology and distancing from the American government of their historical and political influences and responsibilities for the causes of the attacks (2-3). If we go back to the butterfly effect metaphor, and if we take into consideration the political, historical and economic grounds behind the terrorists' motivations, I would argue that perhaps, what we witnessed on 9/11 may

have been the tornado instead of the flapping of the butterfly's wings. Although the political, historical and economic effects and causes of the attacks are of extreme importance when discussing 9/11, as mentioned in the Introduction, such debate will not be developed and discussed in detail in this thesis, as it steers away from the literary perspective and analyses intended by this research.

Muller also discusses the "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign, created in New York, and latter exported to the rest of the American States by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The objective of this campaign was to increase people's vigilance and report any kind of suspicious activities. Despite having some effective cases, such as a "street vendor's successful intervention against a Times Square bombing in May 2010," the author adds that this new way of behaving changed the way the average person saw and perceived every day acts, such as commuting, using public transportation, being in crowded places, among others. She further quotes Jean Baudrillard, as the latter terms a "subtle mental terrorism" as being the idea that society was infiltrated by potential terrorists, leading people to suspect every single person, especially, according to Baudrillard, "Arabs, Muslims, those appearing to be Arab or Muslim, and – even more specifically – of men fitting any of these descriptions" (qtd. in Muller 6-7). This scenario of hypervigilance is of extreme importance when discussing how fictionally Jassim and Salwa were perceived by the American society after September 11.

Throughout the novel, it is clear that any kind of persecution is mostly done against Jassim, and not against Salwa. In the novel, one of the few, if not the only scene in which Salwa is confronted/discriminated against her nationality is when one of her customers at the bank asks her where she was from, to which Salwa answered she is a Palestinian from Jordan. Not really aware of what that meant, the woman further asks what it meant to be a Palestinian from Jordan with an underlaying "*does it mean you will steal my money and blow up my*

world?" (113). Salwa then explains that her family is from Palestine but were expelled from their homeland after the establishment of the state of Israel and sought refuge in Jordan. She then "smiled her sweetest smile, the one that would force her to believe that this woman was only asking out of curiosity," and asked her customer where she was from, to which Salwa received an extremely patriotic answer: "Here, born and raised. I'm a native Tucsonan, American born and raised" (113-14). The woman expresses her desire to have her account handled by someone else, explaining that she would feel more comfortable working with a person she could understand better. Salwa, on the verge of her emotions, asks her if she would like to work with "a Mexican man or an American lesbian?" The woman furiously stands up and expresses her dissatisfaction towards Salwa, to which Salwa simply replies that she was more than "welcome to speak with [her] manager" (114).

Here it is worth pointing out the difference in Salwa's and Jassim's attitude towards these moments of discrimination. She demonstrates much more the need to defend her status of being an "immigrant" than her husband. I decided to put the word immigrant between quotation marks, as in a way, Salwa is not legally an immigrant as she is an American citizen. However, because her family is Arab, and she possesses what are stereotypically considered strong Arab physical features, the fact that she was born in the United States is not "visibly" seen by a "regular" American citizen. Furthermore, we know that she was only born in the country and moved in the first years of her life back to Jordan, therefore, although being an American citizen and being able to enjoy of the legal benefits and status of being such, she does not consider herself to be a "true" American citizen, as she recognizes her culture, native tongue and homeland as being an Arab one. As Dewulf states, she is a "strong and assertive woman who knows what she wants," and that she clearly fights for her and her husband's rights when faced with discrimination (54).

According to Dewulf, Salwa's role of the protector, rather than of the one who receives protection is "an inversion of the traditional role model," and that unlike her husband, "Salwa feels the urge to defend herself as an immigrant and wants to convince people to see through the prejudices against Arab Americans that the War on Terror has caused" (54). The author adds that this role is reaffirmed in the novel when Jassim is being questioned by the FBI and comes to the conclusion that "if Salwa were here, she would be able to make this right, would turn the investigators' questions around so they could see how ridiculous they were" (232). It is clear that Jassim understands the protective role his wife has in his life, and towards the end of the novel, he is burdened by the fact that he did not manage to protect her in return. Jassim was unable to support his wife during her miscarriage, as he found himself lost in his thoughts, the accident and the federal investigation. Moreover, when Salwa is assaulted by Jake and is at the hospital, Jassim blames himself as he apologizes to his wife for his inability to be a good husband:

> Salwa, I am so sorry it has come to this. For what happened. I feel that I am responsible […] I've not provided for you what you needed, allowed you to be who you wanted. I should have recognized that you would have been better off staying in Jordan. I was selfish to have brought you here. I realized that today. Salwa, I am so sorry. All of this is my fault for being weak. (326-27)

Regarding the moments of discrimination against Jassim, when talking to her friend Trini about Jassim, Penny is questioned on how she was certain that he was different from the terrorists they were watching on TV (280-81). Although Penny believes and trusts Jassim, when she faces her fear of whether her "relationship" with him will work (after all, Jassim is a high middle-class successful professional who drives a Mercedes, and she is a waitress), she finds herself questioning if he was indeed a terrorist or not. She also wonders if perhaps he had invited her on a date because "he was going to blow them both up, along with the

Botanical Gardens," which she immediately takes back and thinks it was crazy of her to even imagine Jassim could do such a thing (294).

Besides Penny's suspicion, Jassim is the target of an FBI investigation due to his influential job in regards with the city's water supply. As mentioned before, at the beginning of the novel, Jassim had a morning routine in which he woke up early, left his home and went swimming for about 30-45 minutes. He would follow this routine for at least four times a week. However, after the attacks, and with the news of Salwa's miscarriage, a now disturbed Jassim started not following his routine so often anymore. After 9/11, Jack Franks, a former marine who would also swim early in the morning and whose daughter abandoned her parents and became a Muslim, starts investigating and "keeping an eye" on Jassim. He calls his friend Samuel, an FBI agent, to report his suspicions about Jassim, as he has "a funny feeling about [Jassim]," and "feel[s] like he's not on the up and up" (172). He talks to Diane, the receptionist of the gym where the two of them swim, and she reports that Jassim has not been coming so frequently to swim anymore. Diane, contrary to Jack's opinion, believes that Jack is acting crazy as she thinks Jassim is "a swimmer, not some religious freak." Jack agrees with her, but still would like her to inform him if she discovered something strange about Jassim (172-73).

Although Jack understands that he might be acting unreasonably when it comes to his suspicious about Jassim, his old mentality from when he used to be a Marine Officer makes him rationalize his irrationality:

> *These are some scary times we live in*, he reasoned to himself. *My number-one duty is to help protect my country. The president said that specifically, that it is our job to be on the alert for suspicious behavior, to help the police, to be the eyes and ears of the community. Besides, if it turns out to be nothing, then no harm done to anyone.*

> *Dammit, if you're going to live in this country, you're going to have to abide by the rules here.* (173)

Jack's duty to his country is bigger and more important than being rational and not discriminating or being biased against someone. He started to follow Jassim and discovered that he would drive aimlessly, and at times, he would go to Denny's. Jack could not understand the reason why Jassim would go to that part of town, as "there was nothing strategic there as far as Jack could see, no office buildings, no municipalities" (215). Jack noticed that Jassim would not meet anyone at Denny's, would only talk to the waitress (Penny), and would make no phone call, nor do anything suspicious. Jassim would also sometimes just "pull over by the side of the road and just sit" in his car (215).

Jack had a dossier on Jassim with his professional information: Jassim had a B.S in civil engineering from the University of Jordan; and he had taken his Ph.D. in hydrology at the University of Arizona. Moreover, Jack knew Jassim and Salwa had been married for nine years, and knew that Salwa, besides working at the bank, was also a real estate agent. In Jack's opinion there was nothing that would "suggest sinister activity;" however, his paranoia and stress led Jack to ignore the signs that he was having a heart attack at the grocery store as he "couldn't have a heart attack in the grocery store when there was still work to be done" (215). In my opinion, Jack's actions and constant paranoia are a result of the atmosphere of fear and cultural disruption which was heavily present in a post-9/11 United States. Jack put his duty to protect his country so high in his mind that all signs of rationality were completely disregarded.

The investigation on Jassim led by the FBI was not only led by Jack's contacts. At Jassim's work, two of his coworkers, Bella and Lisa, were so angry about the attacks that they "wanted to get revenge and they wanted to be involved in the revenge" (271). Bella called the FBI and despite the agency's dismissal of her call, she started logging on a notebook

everything related to Jassim: what time he arrived at work, what he had said, what he wore, his behavior, etc. After two months of meticulously cataloguing him, Bella called the FBI a second time. Of course, some simple phone calls coming from an enraged secretary are not enough to have the FBI open a federal case. Although we do not know for sure what caused the Agency to open the investigation, we can conclude that Jack's calls, Bella's reports and the car accident in which Jassim was involved resulting in Evan's accidental death were reasons enough for the FBI.

On December 11, after having discovered that Salwa had had a miscarriage, Jassim decided to drive to his gym so he could swim, clear his head and put his thoughts in order, when suddenly, Evan, a boy riding his skateboard with his friend, rode in front of him and was run over by Jassim's car. A now even more disturbed Jassim called 911 and proceeds to provide aid to the boy. In that "circle of helplessness," Jassim tried "to make that ultimate jump into American life, the one that promises a happy ending for everyone if you just believe it hard enough," while he assured the boy that everything would be alright, even though Jassim did not believe it in fact would (119). The paramedics and the police soon arrived, and Jassim was escorted to the side by an officer who took his statement of what had happened. According to Silke Dewulf, "although Jassim is proficient in English, the shock of the accident makes the use of English more difficult for him" (49), and we find Jassim, in the novel, struggling to communicate correctly, doubting whether people were indeed understanding him. Halaby tells us that, at that moment of the statement, Jassim was "standing at the end of each sentence and translating it back to make sure he said what he had wanted to say" (120).

After having his statement taken, and being examined by the paramedic, Jassim was cleared from the accident scene, as the other witness corroborated Jassim's story, confirming that he was not speeding, and his initial intention to avoid hitting Evan with his car. However,

while he was waiting for it all to be over, Jassim questions himself on how he could undo such situation and if his life would ever be the same (124).

As mentioned above, Evan's accidental death is a very important part of the federal investigation led by the FBI on Jassim. But why would an accident be relevant to the investigation? One detail that Jassim was not aware about Evan is that he had a "Terrorist Hunting License" sticker on his skateboard, which according to the teenager, allowed him to "hunt up some terrorists," and "kick [their] ass[es]" when he found one (75). Jassim only came to discover this fact about Evan when being interrogated by Agents James and Fletcher. After Jassim denies his knowledge of such "license," Agent Fletcher questions Jassim on whether they were to believe that "it [was] a coincidence that the boy [Jassim] killed hated Arabs," to which Jassim replied that "having a 'terrorist hunting license' and hating Arabs are two very different things," and that he thought that there was "a good percentage of this country that [felt] the way Evan did, scared and at the same time tough against an unknown enemy." (231).

While reading the novel, it was clear to me that such investigation and such persecution against Jassim was only taking place as a result of the terrorist attacks. Had he run over Evan on September 10, the boy would most likely would not have a "Terrorist Hunting License" on his skateboard, and undoubtedly, such accident would not have been taken into consideration by the FBI on whether or not to investigate Jassim. Further in his interrogation, Jassim is asked to describe his typical day, to which he simply says his day is not so much different to the day of any other American. "That may be, but the rest of America does not have access to the entire city's water supply with the means to tamper with it," was Agent Fletcher's response (232). Here I return to the point mentioned in the previous section of this thesis: the "us" vs. "them;" the "patriotic" vs. "unpatriotic." Jassim need to prove/convince Agent James and Fletcher that he is one of "us/patriotic" and not one of "them/unpatriotic,"

and here I would even add the word "terrorist" to the latter pair. When questioned about his access to Tucson's water supply, Jassim simply replies:

> 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. (232)

This is actually the first moment in the novel in which Jassim defends his immigrant status by replying that the fact that he is of Arab descent should have no significance on whether he would or would not abuse his influence and control over the city's water supply. Another aspect that was being investigated by the FBI is the fact that Salwa had transferred fourteen thousand dollars on September 12th followed by their knowledge that Salwa was receiving constant calls from Hassan, Salwa's ex-boyfriend and an old friend her family. After fifty minutes of investigation and questioning over lunch, an irritated and nauseous Jassim goes back to the office.

When driving back to work, a confused Jassim questioned why Salwa had sent much more money than she regularly sends to her family without telling him, as well as why Hassan was calling her. Moreover, in his naivety, Jassim still believes that the investigation on him is nothing more than a mistake, as he knows that he

> had done nothing wrong and this was America and there should have to be proof of negligence on his part for his job to be affected. People, companies, the city, shouldn't be able to pull accounts on the basis of his being an Arab. Yes, finally he saw what had been sitting at the back of his consciousness for some time in a not-so-whispered

> voice: *with or against*. But was he not *with? I understand American society*, he wanted to scream. *I speak your language. I pay taxes to your government. I play your game. I have a right to be here*. How could this be happening? (234)

We see here the first moment in which Jassim is faced by the simple fact that he is an Arab is one of the main reasons, if not the only, I would argue, for his being investigated by the FBI. If he and Salwa were not from Jordan; the fact that his wife had transferred a large amount of money overseas; the accident resulting in Evan's death; Jack's and his coworkers' suspicions; none of them would be grounds for opening a federal investigation by the FBI. Additionally, his Arab nationality combined with the investigation led many of his customers to call his boss, Marcus, to question whether Jassim was indeed the right person for the job, as many of them were opting not to work with Jassim anymore. Such financial and business setback led Marcus to question his supposedly blind and complete trust in Jassim:

> Marcus hung up the phone. Never in his life had he felt so torn. This was his third call from clients who no longer wanted Jassim working for them. This last phone call unsettled him more than the others had.
>
> […]
>
> Marcus considered himself to be a good man who did the right thing, but he could not find the right thing in this situation […] And so he waited for his friend and colleague of fifteen years to return, while his thoughts battled one another (268-70).

Marcus then decides to fire Bella, the receptionist whose paranoia and sense of revenge helped to fuel the FBI investigation and to raise suspicion with Jassim's clients. However, Bella was not the only one whom he decided to fire. Unfortunately, as the company was losing business, and due to the fact that Jassim had been acting differently from his usual self, and had concealed to disclosure his personal problems, which led to his supposedly strange

behavior, Marcus believe he could no longer trust and defend Jassim, reducing their friendship to a simple business decision. Nevertheless, Jassim's nationality also played a role in his resignation:

> It was no longer a matter of defending a friend, of standing up for what he believed was right. He was only a partner in the business, and it was out of his hands […]
>
> In this case there was no behavior to change. Jassim could not change who he was, and Marcus recognized consciously that in part he was firing him for that reason, though it would be the lost contracts and unreliability on which he would focus (295-6).

It is clear from Marcus's thoughts that Jassim *could not change who he was*, meaning, Jassim would always be an Arab, and such fact is unchangeable, and that this indeed played an important role in Marcus's decision to let Jassim go. Despite trying to make this process easy and respectful, Jassim's resignation was done, in my opinion, without any respect and dignity to his story and work in the company: "I will have someone escort you out and we will have your things sent to your house" (297). Jassim was advised to get only his coat and that the rest of his personal belongings would be sent to him. Although it was not clear in the narrative why Marcus decided not to allow Jassim to sort his personal items himself, it seems to me this could be a way for him, as a manager, to go through them himself, perhaps even let the FBI analyze them, and then be certain that, even though Jassim was not longer at the company, they have done everything in their power to assure their clients that the "menace" was investigate and contained.

The terrorist attacks resulted in a psychologically traumatized American society, which then again, changed that society rather drastically and fast. The WASP United States wanted answers and culprits for the attacks, and a sense of hypervigilance was needed to ensure that everyone was safe. Hence, people who could be seen as potential terrorists or threats were thoroughly reported. It is clear, throughout Halaby's novel, that there is a significant shift in

the way Salwa and Jassim were seen by society and their peers from the first chapter (before 9/11) to the second chapter onwards (after 9/11). The attacks were a vital piece in this shift within their social place. Moreover, the added stress and tension in the characters' lives helped to drive them even further away from each other, leading us, the readers, to find two broken characters at the end of the narrative

3.3. Social Anomie: Living in a no Longer a Promised Land

Towards the end of the novel, Salwa and Jassim found themselves in an almost unbearable social status, in which they are no longer seen as part of a society that up to now seemed very welcoming and embracing. Their mere existence was the cause of a federal investigation, constant discrimination and prejudice, and they are now seen by many, and to some extent also by the American government, as potential threats to national security. One can easily argue, and reasonably too, that the Arab profiling was and still is very important to screen the potential terrorists from entering our countries. Additionally, it is still rather common to hear reports of people who have been detained or even further screened at airports simply because they were wearing a veil. However, such actions discriminate the vast majority of Arab and Muslims who do not support such radical and extremist actions from their cultural and religious fellowmen.

Jassim and Salwa, in the novel, do not show any Muslim and Arab habits and practices, being depicted as having strong American behaviors and attitudes. They somewhat believe in the "American Dream" and are glad to be a part of such society, where one can, supposedly, be whoever one wants to. After the attacks, such social dogma was quickly destroyed and the characters' place in society swiftly changed from being one of "us" into being one of "them." They are now forced to stand their ground and prove that they are

entitled to be, once again, seen as one of "us." When discussing social anomie and the reflects it can cause to an individual, the sociologist Émile Durkheim states,

> No living being can be happy or even exist unless his needs are sufficiently proportioned to his means. In other words, if his needs require more than can be granted, or even merely something of a different sort, they will be under continual friction and can only function painfully. (207)

Jassim and Salwa's clash against their host country's society only creates friction and pain, resulting in a distraught Jassim tormented by the aftermath of Evan's accidental death and the FBI investigation, as well as a displaced Salwa longing to go back to what she now refers to as home: Jordan. Durkheim discusses that the idea of being part of a universe, and even feeling part of a society, is not only dependent on oneself, but "on other beings, who consequently restrain and regulate it" (212). Their existence in the United States, and consequently social acceptance did not only depend on themselves; society and its rules need to allow Jassim and Salwa to be accepted and be seen as somewhat their peers.

Durkheim defends that when faced with a disaster, society creates a system of declassification that "casts certain individuals into a lower state than their previous one" (213). It is clear, from what was discussed in the previous sections in this chapter, that the social and cultural rupture created in the American society after the terrorist attacks resulted in such system of declassification, taking the Arab and Muslim communities in the United States out of the realm of the invisible and throwing them into the center of society as people to be watched, controlled and suspected of.

Moreover, Durkheim affirms that as a result of any abrupt social shift, all of a community's "advantages of social influence are lost" and that "their moral education has to be recommenced." Moreover, he claims that society is not able to readjust immediately after such change/rupture, therefore, the condition imposed by society comes with intolerance,

resulting in a constant state of suffering and dissociation, "reduc[ing] [their] existence even before they have made trial of it" (213). Throughout the novel it is clear that Jassim and Salwa suffered from such dissociation and sudden new place in society. A country whose rules and customs they were used to, loved even, now seems to be a land which is rejecting their own existence and forcing them to resort to escaping, fleeing even, to their homeland.

At the end of the novel, a determined Salwa, bound to go back to her home Jordan, comes to say goodbye to her lover Jake, who at first believed Salwa's culture and language to be beautiful, romantic, sexy and interesting, only to find an angry Jake at Salwa's decision to leave, heavily devaluing her culture and background: "I said you're running back to the pigsty you came from" (320). Salwa was shocked to hear such derogative words from Jake and decides not to argue back against Jake's repugnant words. A high on drugs Jake comes after Salwa as she is leaving his home and brutally assaults her. She is taken to the hospital, and a torn Jassim comes to be at her side and realizes that they might have been better not having come to the United States after all.

The novel closes with a very interesting parallel between the fairy tale narrative we see interwoven with the main narrative throughout the novel and Jassim and Salwa's characters. In this fairy tale, we are told the story of a young girl, here representing Salwa, who was born far from her homeland to parents who were refugees and had their real home "snatched away and reworked, a story taken and rewritten" (331). When she was born, her mother was visited by a *ghula*, a demon woman, a witch, who I believe in the case of Halaby's novel stands for the American Dream, the illusion of the American society and the United States as a whole. According to Mubarak Altwaiji, in his article "Issues Related to Arab Folklore with reference to Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* a post 9/11 novel", a *ghula* is an "evil female figure from Arabic folklore," who tries to lure children to play with her and then eats them after they are trapped in her grip (118).

When younger, Salwa would listen to her grandmother's folktales and would ask her what the reason for those stories was, such as the story of Nus Nsays, a small boy who managed to trick the *ghula* and capture her, bringing, therefore, peace to his village, as they would no longer suffer under the witch's attacks. Salwa's grandmother simply replied that it was "just a story," to which Salwa wanted to know what the point of him being so small was: "*To show that with determination and a clever wit, small characters can defeat larger evils. Every Palestinian has a bit of Nus Nsays within him. Or her,"* would be her grandmother's reply (98). However, when questioned who the *ghula* was, and what she represented, Salwa's grandmother would not provide an answer to her granddaughter. The fairy tales that Salwa's grandmother told her had the objective of teaching her some of the values of their Arab culture. Moreover, these narratives have the function of foreshadowing at times, as well as to enrich the narrative, to which, Altwaiji argues that it "give[s] [Halaby's] narrative a true touch of beauty and glamour, something Arabian and very close to the hearts of the immigrants" (118).

Returning to the idea of the *ghula* being the United States and its illusions luring Arab immigrants into her lair only to eat them up, and crush their ideas and hopes for the desired "American Dream," Altwaiji mentions that "only clever immigrants can overcome [the *ghula's*] difficulties" (121). In Halaby's narrative, Nus Nsays is an example of such clever immigrant, who managed to trick the *ghula* and sail through her treachery and still managed to be true to his cultural identity. Salwa, unfortunately, was not so clever and, as we see the clear parallels between the main narrative and the fairy tale, cannot help but fall victim to the *ghula* and her tricks, similar to the young maiden, who unaware of the *ghula*'s presence, was sewn with "a thousand and one red threads" at birth, which would tie her to the *ghula* forever (331). Such threads represent the ties Salwa has with the United States; this land of prosperity, hope and freedom, and every now and then, throughout her upbringing, the

"*ghula*/American Dream" would tug at a strand, and Salwa would feel the yearn for something different: she would be drawn to the promises of the "American Dream."

Little by little the *ghula* managed to bring the now young maiden closer to her, luring her into witch's false hopes and dreams, waiting for the perfect time to devour her. Many years passed, and the maiden started wishing to go back to her home Jordan, however, "each time the girl mentioned her homesickness, the old woman offered her a new gift to assuage her sadness" (333). At the end of this fairy tale, the *ghula* is killed and the threads between her and the little girl are torn. However, by destroying the *ghula*'s false pretenses, fictitious hope and pretend happiness, the young maiden is extremely wounded. To destroy and separate the *ghula* from the maiden is to destroy them both.

At the end of the fairy tale, as the nightingale, representing Jassim, severs all of the threads connecting the *ghula* to the maiden, he is transformed into an "ordinary man" and "not a handsome prince" (336). He then "lift[s] up the unconscious and damaged maiden and carrie[s] her home across land and sea, hoping that with the proper care she [will] recover from her wounds" (336). The fairy tale ends without a "happily ever after," as our narrator tells us that "happily ever after happens only in American fairy tales," and when questioned whether this was not an American fairy tale, the reply is that "it was and it wasn't" (336).

The representations in the fairy tale show the promises and dreams that the United States signified to the characters at the beginning of the narrative. Sadly, as a result of a new society after 9/11, such promises and dreams are no longer there, and their realization of their disrupted place in society led to the death of their "American" counterparts. Salwa and Jassim were no longer any other citizen working, paying taxes, and living their ordinary "us" lives in the United States. They were now potential terrorists, a menace, people to keep records on, people to be investigated by the FBI and to be discarded and disregarded mainly based on the fact that they are Arabs and Muslims.

The threads and the promises were now being pulled harder, at the same time, the price to be paid by each pull was also higher, and such high prices were simply too much for Jassim and Salwa to pay. The United States was no longer that welcoming country: the ideal and dream of luxury, silk pajamas, and of being able to help the world through a better water system. All of their ideals and hopes for their lives in the United States were nothing but broken threads now. Sadly, neither Salwa nor Jassim was able to be as clever as Nus Nsays when dealing with the *ghula* in a post 9/11 United States. Neither of them was able to trick her back and live their *American Dream*, as they are now faced with other forces coming from the American society and threads being pulled at the same time, therefore, demanding more of the Arab American community. At the end of the narrative, by tearing the "*ghula's*/America's" threads tying the young maiden, we find the characters empty, picking up the pieces of their now destroyed lives in a post 9/11 United States.

4. Final Considerations

In the previous two chapters of this thesis, I discussed some of the relevant aspects from Foer's and Halaby's novels regarding how the characters' lives were changed after the terrorist attacks in New York, on September 11, 2001. On the one hand, we have Oskar's life being changed completely by the sudden death of his father, who was not only his supporter, but also, in my opinion, his best friend. Oskar's life is left voided of meaning, and the young child struggles to cope with a life without his father. On the other hand, we have Jassim and Salwa, two Arab-Muslim immigrants who live in Tucson. Despite being far away from the site of the attacks, their lives also changed rapidly and unexpectedly after 9/11. Salwa starts to question her desire to stay in the United States and longs to go back to her home Jordan, while Jassim, tormented by his wife's miscarriage, accidently runs over a young boy whose skateboard has a "Terrorist Hunting License" sticker on, and after this incident, he becomes the target of an investigation led by the FBI.

In this final part of my analysis and discussion, I will compare the characters' experiences from both novels in order to debate on how much their lives were affected by the aftermath of the attacks. Although their experiences were different, and their losses cannot be compared either, this thesis does not intend to judge which character had the most significant or traumatic experience after the attacks. On the contrary, the intention and relevancy of this discussion is to debate how the terrorist attacks which took place on September 11 most likely had a deeper impact on the American society, including "natives" and immigrants, as opposed to just one of the sides of the duality of "us" vs. "them" created by the Bush administration.

This discussion is based on literary works and, therefore, any type of social debate herein is solely based on how Foer's and Halaby's works portray a post-9/11 American society. However, despite this being an academic Master's thesis on literature, such

discussions of a more general and broader social aftermath of the attacks are of extreme importance, not only to help us better understand the ripples caused by them, but also to discuss, and perhaps even question, some of the policies created worldwide after 9/11. Furthermore, it is important to better understand the duality of the "us" vs. "them;" which side is the victim, and which is the victimizer, and debate whether there is indeed the need to have such duality in the American society, which rippled into other countries around the world.

Another important aspect regarding the relevance of this thesis is the seeming lack of academic works discussing the Arab-American experience in a post 9/11 United States. When doing preliminary bibliographical research, books and articles on literary works on the American experience and discussing the American "side of the coin" seemed easier to find. Differently, finding relevant work regarding Arab-American literary works appeared to be a bit more difficult, as there seem to be fewer critical works exploring issues related to this topic. Regarding comparative work, i.e. articles or books in which one or more novels on 9/11 were being compared, I only found Dewulf's work, in which she compares various novels and short stories written by Arab Americans both in pre and post-9/11 contexts. However, works comparing one or more literary works from the "American" perspective (i.e. from a perhaps "white American" perspective) seemed easier to find. Moreover, I was unable to find a book or an article written comparing the literature written by American and Arab-American authors on a post-9/11 perspective, which does not mean that such works do not exist. Therefore, I believe that the discussion in this thesis is important to contribute to future research on the topic of literature after 9/11.

Throughout the analysis in the previous chapters, I discussed how the attacks dramatically disrupted the characters' lives and how the three protagonists (Oskar, Jassim and Salwa) lost their sense and place in society as a result of the social changes in a post 9/11 United States. Versluys argues in his book that "only in death did the World Trade Center

workers acquire the individuality that, as cogs in a nameless mechanism, they had been denied during their lifetime" (8). Unquestionably, when we think about the highly capitalist American society, such workers were indeed only numbers and ID badges. They were only able to reach the "status" of "heroes," "victims," "innocents" and be pulled out of the social invisibility inherent in many societies due to a political agenda of retraumatization through the media, and the idea that the American society was the victim of the attacks.

As Versluys further comments on Marshall Berman's ideas, when he states that such narrative depicts "how heroically extraordinary […] ordinary life can be" (8). I would, however, like to draw a parallel between these "heroically extraordinary ordinary" people and the Arab-American society. By placing the victims on a higher crystal pedestal – and I am not here saying that their deaths should, in any way, not be mourned or even honored– the American society was forced to find the culprits for those deaths; after all, every crime has a criminal behind it. Regrettably, the blame seemingly fell on a whole portion of the American society: the Arab Americans. Naming these "nameless cogs" resulted in society pushing the Arab Americans out of the realm of invisibility and further increasing the tension and friction between an Arab and non-Arab United States. Such movement clearly had deep impact on Halaby's characters.

The events on September 11 changed forever the life of young Oskar, stripping him of his family stability and notion of safety and normality. After his father's passing, Oskar started to find answers and reconnect to his father by searching for the meaning of the key. While doing so, he builds his own narrative, invents to keep his mind busy, starts telling lies, writes his feelings in a book, and collects the pictures of all the Blacks he visited. At the end of the novel, an Oskar trying to reconcile and deal with his trauma reorders the pictures of a falling man, and when flipping through them in reverse order, instead of showing the man falling off the World Trade Center, he appears to go up. By doing so, Oskar imagines how it

would be if his father had been able to reverse his actions and walk backwards home – away from the towers. If Oskar's father had been able to do so, Oskar believes they "would have been safe" (326). When Oskar creates this extensive narrative to himself, we, as readers, are taken to a deeper understanding of Oskar's way of dealing with trauma and trying to cope with his loss.

In Halaby's novel, as it was mentioned in the previous chapter, we also have an underlying narrative which mirrors the "real" narrative of the novel. In the fairy tale of the old *ghula* and how she sewed herself under a young maiden's skin at the child's birth, we see how she lured the maiden, little by little, into a beautiful promise which we later discover was nothing but a trap. Halaby uses the *ghula* as a metaphor for the "American Dream," and how Salwa's (the maiden) birth nationality was something always latent inside of her, calling her out, promising her a life of freedom, comfort, happiness which she might never have been able to achieve in Jordan. As the *ghula* would lure the maiden into her lair by pulling the strings connecting the two of them, so would the United States call out to Salwa, across the ocean, promising her a life of happiness, freedom, luxury and silk pajamas.

At the end of the novel, Halaby presents us with with a broken and empty Salwa, dozing in and out of consciousness after having been brutally assaulted by Jake, her coworker with whom she was having an affair. Similarly to the end of the fairy tale, in which the *ghula* is killed and the strings connecting her to the young maiden are severed, freeing the young maiden from the *ghula´s* influence and treachery, Salwa comes to terms that the promises the United States made to her are nothing but lies and that the "American Dream" she so longed for is now broken. We are also faced with an almost political persecuted Jassim regretting having made the decision to come to the United States, now believing that Salwa and he would have been better off if they had stayed in Jordan.

At the end of both novels, the main characters realize how much the terrorist attacks have changed their lives. Oskar – as well as his grandparents – starts to come to terms with his grief, and begins to understand that, sadly, his father's passing was unavoidable, and not matter how much he tries to find meaning to the key, nothing would be able to bring his father back, no invention would have been able to protect Thomas from his ill fate, nor would anything have prepared Oskar for 9/11. Jassim and Salwa, in their own perspectives, are also directly affected by the attacks. Their social status, reputation, position within society and their credibility are all to be questioned, watched over, and when discussing what happened to Jassim in the novel, even investigated. The once with-open-arms-welcoming American society was now questioning the position Jassim and Salwa had and, in a way, their intentions and reasons to live in the United States. After successive and collective hints against Jassim, as previously discussed in more details in the second chapter of this thesis, he was put under a federal investigation which resulted in the loss of his boss's confidence and later his job. Salwa was also not exempt from longing to distance herself from the United States. Despite being American by birth, Salwa now felt the desire to go back to Jordan, where she considers to be her actual home. She felt a void caused by the emptiness of her life in the United States:

> She saw herself no better than before, only older […] Her American freedom had given her exactly that: American freedom. Emptiness is a dangerous substance, allows its possessor to believe in taking rash measures as a way to fill up the tank cheaply. (Like going abroad in search of water or oil.) Salwa desperately wanted to fill it, but having nothing to barter with, no weapons, and no maps with which to find a well, she was left with nothing more than her own flimsy silk-pajama fantasies of potential (202).

Salwa's desire for luxury – the calling and tricks of the *ghula* lurking underneath her skin – was no longer enough to satisfy her and numb her constant craving for meaningfulness in a seemingly meaningless lifestyle.

Although we find Oskar, Salwa and Jassim at the end of Foer's and Halaby's novels in completely different stages in their lives: Oskar is only then starting to deal and cope better with his loss, whereas Jassim and Salwa are found broken and displaced in a country which had so much to offer them at first. To some extent, there is a reversal in the characters' status in both novels. In Foer's novel, we met a promising Oskar, who then has his world turned upside down in the end of the narrative, only to find him beginning to learn how to pick up the pieces of his life back together. Although Oskar was not able to process his grief entirely, Foer closes the narrative on an optimistic note, and us, as readers, are left with the comforting relief that little Oskar will be alright. Contrary to what happens throughout Foer's narrative, Halaby introduces us to the Jassim and Salwa, a couple of well-off Arab immigrants who have nice jobs, live in a good part of Tucson, are economically active members of society, and are seen as any other "regular folk" by their peers. However, the attacks in Manhattan changed their *status quo* and they enter in a downward spiral, and in the end, Halaby shows us two characters who are broken, distant from each other, and unable to recollect themselves.

Discussing Halaby's final words in her novel: "'Happily ever after' happens only in American fairy tales. *Wasn't this an American fairy tale?* It was and it wasn't" (336), I would argue that the Schells' story could be seen as an "American fairy tale" whereas the Jassim and Salwa were not allowed to have such privilege. The United States is still a "promised land;" however, its promises are seemingly no longer available to everyone.

The objective of this thesis was to discuss and compare how the lives of Foer's and Halaby's characters were affected by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, aiming to debate the idea that, in my opinion, many people hold that the "white" American society was

the sole victim of the attacks. The political, economic and historical background and motivations for the attacks were mentioned but not discussed in depth as this thesis concerns the literary study of the two novels: *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Once in a Promised Land: A Novel.* Through this discussion, I intended to raise the idea that perhaps both sides of the "us" vs. "them" duality can actually be seen as victims and victimizers of the attacks at the same time.

By carrying out the attacks, part of the Arab world – the most radical one, which does not represent the great majority of the Arab world's ideas – hijacked the planes used to cause the destruction that day. In this sense, it is clear that the *them* in this duality were the victimizers, and the *us*, the victims. On the one hand, when comparing the two novels, Oskar's clear status of victim is easily perceived and understood. On the other hand, by taking Halaby's novels into consideration, Jassim and Salwa had their place in society completely removed from them, without any warning, or without any way of defending themselves. The American society now saw all Arab-Americans as potential threats, as well as the ones to be blamed for the attacks. Therefore, to some parts of the American society, Arab-Americans were no longer their neighbors; they were now their "enemies." In this sense, Jassim and Salwa can also be considered victims of the attacks, and, the American society – since much of it was pushed and encouraged by the media and governmental agendas – were acting as victimizers. Furthermore, such duality in the relationship between victim and victimizer when talking about the United States after September 11 is a complex topic and could be discussed in a much broader debate by including the social, political and economic aspects. Notwithstanding that such complex sociological discussion is not the aim of a thesis in the field of literary studies, it is nonetheless important to mention the relevance of the debate raised by the analysis of the fictional works and how this Master's thesis can contribute to the ever increasing body of critical investigation on 9/11 fiction and Arab American literature.

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