

Beginnings in Jonathan Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and Alia Yunis' *The Night Counter*

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Abstract—Drawing on Edward Said's "Beginnings theory," which is the central thesis in his book *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975), several post- 9/11 narratives reflect means for perceiving how these various accounts foreshadow a new era in both literature and political discourse. These accounts constitute a "beginning," to use a Saidian term, heralding a new vision of the Islamic (Arab)/Western representation; a shift from a "historical pattern." In this study, the tension created by turning a "historical aboriginality" into personal representations is reevaluated from a Saidian perspective. Such post- 9/11 narratives lend themselves to manifesting how the interrelation between an "obligation" for narration and a "sympathetic imagination" create beginnings. To achieve this end, the study will examine two narratives: Jonathan Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) and Alia Yunis' *The Night Counter* (2009). By advancing and investigating these narratives, the study aims at reaching new ideas about the representation of a major event in political history, namely: 9/11.

Index Terms—9/11, post- 9/11 narratives, Edward Said, beginning theory

I. INTRODUCTION

The current study examines the implications of 9/11 on literature. More specifically, it examines how this event has impacted literary writing by focusing on two narratives written at the wake of 9/11. What is proposed in this study is that post- 9/11 literary writing is a scene for capturing the new consciousness that emerged after the attacks. This also includes a specific language that was coined to feature that consciousness. This claimed consciousness is highly political, and is not noticeably familiar in the period that precedes the terrorist attack of 2001. In his *Infinite Thought*, Badiou (2003) claims that 9/11 has customized a particular meaning for terrorism that justified the "war on terrorism" as well as its "infinite" scope (p. 153). As a result of these changes, a body of writing was formed in reaction creating what has come to be known as "post- 9/11 narratives." This change invites a reading of 9/11 as a "beginning" in literary thought whereby literature introduces and comments on certain historical and political reflections. Edward Said's (1975) "Beginnings theory," which is the central thesis in his *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, provides the basis needed to support and understand the hypothesis of this study.

I shall argue that Said's theory facilitates a thoughtful linkage between 9/11 as a historical event and its implications in literature and narration, and enables a revision of "[l]iterature as an order of repetition" (p. 12). In doing so, I seek to assert that 9/11 has initiated a new consciousness about the encounter between "Islam" and the "West" that can be elucidated in the literary production of the period. Specifically, I trace the elements that help us see how post- 9/11 narratives are cases of "aboriginality" (Said, 1975, p. 349).

Before moving further, it is important to reflect on Said's *Beginnings* and its reception. A beginning, as Said (1975) defines it, is "the first step in the intentional production of meaning" (p. 5). It is a human act of "inaugurating" through writing, and then "maintaining another order of meaning from previous or already existing writing" (Said, 1975, p. 357). From this definition, Said (1975) introduces another concept: "point of departure." A point of departure for Said (1975) is "a new direction or one continuing from old ones" (p. 6).

To problematize his theory, Said (1975) assigns certain features to beginnings. Firstly, a beginning "establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both" (p. 3). This means that a beginning is never divorced from the milieu that precedes it. Even when beginnings are "deformations," they inevitably establish a relation with what they deform (Said, 1975, p. 8). Secondly, a beginning "authorizes; it constitutes an authorization for what follows from it. With regard to what precedes it, [it is a] discontinuity" (Said, 1975, 34). Hence, what sequences from a particular beginning bears an authority in writing. Thirdly, Said (1975) believes that the intention to begin is also associated with an effort of deriving "diverse range of

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originating circumstances (circumstances that give rise to an entire world)” (p. 96). Finally, to assume a beginning entails creating – or recreating – a community of language since the intention to begin is necessarily attached to “verbal constructions” (Said, 1975, p. 4). A text, Said (1975) proclaims, “can speak once the writer’s subjectivity has fully appropriated to itself an entire textual language in which the ‘I’ of the writer/speaker designates an ego functioning in a reality created by that language” (p. 257).

Beginning, succinctly, is an act that entails designating a specific “moment in time, a place, a principle or an action” (Said, 1975, p. 4). 9/11, from such perspective, lends itself as a beginning initiating a new consciousness and countless accounts in the community of language and history. These accounts constitute a “departure” in literature, to use a Saidian term, heralding a new vision of post- 9/11 representations; a shift from a “historical pattern” (Said, 1975, p. 350).

In this study, the tension created by turning a “historical aboriginality” into personal representations is reevaluated (Said, 1975, p. 349). To designate and examine a beginning, Said (1975) believes, is not an easy task, neither in writing nor in criticism. Said (1975) asserts that this requires “the writer [and the critic] to maintain an un-straying obligation to practical reality and sympathetic imagination in equally strong parts” (p. 349). Post- 9/11 narratives lend themselves to manifesting how the interrelation between an “obligation” for narration and a “sympathetic imagination” create beginnings (Said, 1975, p. 349). To explain this point, Said writes:

By obligation I mean here the precision with which the concrete circumstances of any undertaking oblige the mind to take them into account [...] by learning, first, that there is no schematic method that makes all things simple, the second, whatever with reference to one’s circumstances is necessary in order to begin, given one’s field of study. And by referring to sympathetic imagination I mean that to begin to write is to “know” what at the outset cannot be known except by inventing it, exactly, intentionally, auto-didactically. It is the interrelation between this obligation and the sympathetic imagination, however that is crucial (Said, 1975, p. 349).

To reexamine post- 9/11 narratives in light of Said’s beginning theory is not only an act of revision; it is also an act of reviving. Said’s book, though hailed when first introduced into the Academy, was recognized in limited forms of practice and application. For this reason, I believe it would be useful to review some of the critical reception related to *Beginnings*. Mark Taylor, in his study “Edward W. Said: Resistance, Knowledge, Criticism”, introduces the fact that *Beginnings: Intention and Method* was awarded the Lionel Trilling Memorial Award by Said’s own university, Columbia (2016, p. 126). He adds that *Diacritics*, the main journal of the poststructuralist movement in America, devoted an entire extended issue to the book and its composer (Taylor, 2016, p. 126). Taylor says that in spite of the fact that this theory “has not been the subject of a great deal of scholarly analysis, [...] it represented a major critical event” (2016, p. 119). Nevertheless, Taylor states that Said’s book has not achieved wide circulation amid scholarly communities. Still, its publication marked “a major critical event,” Taylor admits (2016, p. 119). In *Beginnings*, Said’s philosophical interest was in connecting forms of human articulations, first to each other, and then to the historical and political world. “Without these connections,” Taylor asserts, “criticism risked becoming little more than a technical pastime, unable or unwilling to examine the political issues to which Said was committed” (2016, p. 123). Taylor claims that Said’s theory is meant to negotiate modes of rational thought, eschew maze of theoretical “absurdities” and link “the social, political, and critical spheres” (2016, p. 128).

Alexander Gelley writes in his review of *Beginnings* that Said’s book touches upon crucial issues at the heart of literary theory while creating “striking and novel” associations between them (1977, p. 214). He believes that it characterizes a daring effort to bring the recent philosophy to bear on the critical scene at large (Gelley, 1977, p. 214). However, Gelley considers the book “disappointing” at times that there are many issues and questions Said leaves “unresolved” (1977, p. 219).

Two years later, in another review, David Halliburton (1979) examines Said’s critical work. He begins his review by showing his concerns about Said’s oscillations from Freudianism to “the semiology of Roland Barthes, to the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, to certain types of linguistics and Marxist analysis, to the *scienza nuova* of Vico, to Valéry, and above all to cultural ‘archeology of Michel Foucault’” (Halliburton, 1979, p. 117). Halliburton proceeds to explore the discontinuity and non-linear progression of the book’s chapters, thus proposing that the book is the practical illustration of one of the implications of Said’s theory; discontinuity. Nevertheless, he admits that this is an “excellent book” (Halliburton, 1979, p. 120). In his opinion, the book incites critical dialogue, and asserts that Said’s book does not only “talk” about beginnings, it indeed becomes one (Halliburton, 1979, p. 120).

In *A Said Dictionary*, R. Radhakrishnan (2012) elicits the word “Beginnings” as one of Said’s noteworthy concepts and provides a comprehensive definition for it. He states that the book registers Said’s “arrival as a brilliant, original, major voice in critical theory” and praises the “long meditation on the concept of Beginnings” (Radhakrishnan, 2012, p. 9). He captures the gist of Said’s theory by declaring that beginnings “are meant to be made and unmade, in the course of history and in the course of narrative development” (Radhakrishnan, 2012, p. 10). Vincenzo Salvatore (2014) shows similar interest in his “A Meditation on Said’s *Beginning*: Reconsidering Text and Career as Sites of Power and Resistance.” Salvatore argues that *Beginnings* established Said’s political path “with a pressing urgency for a reform of criticism and humanism, both in a general and a specific sense” (2014, p. 55). Said’s theory, Salvatore states, is “a humanly historical and psychological literary event” (2014, p. 61).

The previous synopsis of Said's theory and its reception makes the claim about 9/11 as a beginning more plausible. It is a historical event where intention, being human, becomes the starting point for producing meaning. "To identify a beginning," Said asserts, is a human "act of historical understanding" (1975, p. 32). Post- 9/11 narratives, indeed, share a consciousness of a historical responsibility, a notion that Said features as part and parcel of a beginning. They are commemorative texts that broaden the dialogue about the durable influences of 9/11, while integrating the personal with the collective in a semi-historical account. This means that the narratives tend to historicize and politicize in an endeavor to comprehend a shattered scene. By beginning, authors of those narratives become the *aboriginals* of post-9/11 writing where they assume a historical and literary responsibility of initiation.

In light of beginnings theory, post- 9/11 narratives manifest themselves as venues of expression trying to sketch an event that was hard to represent. Politically speaking, the event was not absorbed by Americans – Westerners by extension – who are the victims, and who found themselves, whether they like it or not, part of a war against terrorism. On the other hand, Muslims – Arabs as well – were also unable to comprehend their depiction and stereotyping as responsible for terrorism, and found themselves in many occasions on the defense. On a psychological level, the shock of the attack and the subsequent trauma made it difficult for people to think straight. 9/11 was described by some as an "incommensurable event" (Keniston & Quin, 2008, p. 16). In the introduction to the book *Reflecting 9/11: New Narratives in Literature, Television, Film and Theatre*, Pope and Bryan (2016) state that 9/11 "still remained lodged within the realm of hyperreality — a place marked by simulacra without any real referents" (p. 5-6). Hence, post- 9/11's narration is particularly characterized by an "obligation" to narrate a new consciousness where fiction, or Said's "sympathetic imagination," is needed to aid meaning. The current study explores the narratives of Jonathan Foer and Alia Yunis as alternative readings of 9/11. It investigates diverse realities pertaining to post- 9/11 worlds, difficulties with narrating the pain and trauma of this event, as well as difficulties with responding to islamophobic discourse which aroused in the wake of 9/11.

II. AN ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES IN LIGHT OF SAID'S BEGINNINGS THEORY

A. *Beginning in Jonathan Foer's Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close is a work of fiction by American author Jonathan Safran Foer (2005). It is a post-9/11 narrative that acquired wide recognition as one representation of the aftermath of 9/11. Foer's narrative encapsulates the story of a traumatized child, where in narration models of what is real and surreal collide. Memories and elements of magic, entangled with imagination, become the space that enables narration in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Indeed, Foer's work is featured by incorporating magical realism within historical narration as one way of producing meaning out of a tragic day.

Oskar, Foer's traumatized child-narrator, is an imaginative nine-year-old boy who suffers great anxiety after 9/11. He loses his father in the tragic attacks. This makes him continuously in pursuit of answers pertaining to his location in the world and his family. The worst thing in Oskar's case is that he feels extremely guilty for not picking up the phone to reply to his father's last call from the World Trade Center on 9/11. This maximized his trauma since he had a conviction that he failed to support his father when he needed his son most.

In order to cope with the loss of his father, Oskar creates his self-defense mechanisms. He initiates rules such as avoiding heights. He also resorts to imagining fanciful inventions throughout the narrative, for example, the birdseed shirt. This way, Oskar designs scenarios that could ensure his security and safety in what he believed to be a dangerous post- 9/11 world. Strikingly, Oskar also resorts to science in an endeavor to comprehend the world better. Science, obviously, gives Oskar the concreteness he needed in the midst of the post- 9/11 chaos. Oskar's self-defense mechanisms stand as an act of beginning that also introduces Foer's "intention" to authorize his narrative. To establish "authority" in this way, Said (1975) argues, is to inaugurate "explicit law and guiding force," thus initiating a "community of language" which belongs to the meaning that the author is constructing (p. 16). Based on this, language of inventing becomes an additional dimension of Foer's beginning.

From the very beginning, Foer's authority is traced in the full agency of his child-narrator. In an attempt to recover some memories of his father, Oskar decides to search inside his father's cupboard, and accidentally he finds an envelope with the name "Black" on it. It also encloses a bizarre key. This key triggers mostly all the events in the narrative as Oskar resolves to find answers, and visit each and every person with the last name "Black" in the city of New York to unlock the secret behind his father's key. Oskar's decision takes him into a journey throughout the city. It is a beginning into opening the locks of post- 9/11 New York:

That was my great plan. I would spend my Saturdays and Sundays finding all of the people named Black and learning what they knew about the key in the vase in Dad's closet. In a year and a half I would know everything. Or at least know that I had to come up with a new plan. (Foer, 2005, p. 65)

Planning is a skill that Oskar values, especially in a world where all is shattered. Besides, coming up with a new plan suggests the significance of empirical thinking in a pursuit of meaning. Planning and re-planning, indeed, harps on Said's (1975) conception of a crucial "interplay between beginning and repetition, or between beginning and beginning again" in a process of meaning production (p. 357). Oskar keeps wandering in Manhattan, visiting some people, socializing with them and exploring more about their locked lives. In fact, the people whom Oskar meets share their predicaments and traumas with him. While they uncover their stories, New Yorkers provide "molestations" of the truth

about a collective trauma produced by 9/11. Abe Black, Ada Black, Ira Black, and many others who have the last name "Black," are New Yorkers who unlock stories that were shut by the shock of 9/11. This adds to the task of Oskar, as a narrator, where he becomes a perpetuator of other narratives as well. By unlocking these stories, a new consciousness is revealed.

Revising history with Mr. Black accentuates 9/11's distinct identity in comparison to other historical events. It manifests the event as a beginning in history and in language. Commenting on this, and based on Vichian historical analysis, Said (1975) uses the word "autochthonous" to describe a kind of narration that "is set in a specific history and language," hence, creates its distinct aboriginal identity (p. 356). As evident in his *Beginnings*, Said is aware of the importance of aligning the historicity of a beginning with already existing histories. A beginning history is always in conversation with other overlapping histories, in order to revise, continue or discontinue narratives. Related to this, Mitchum Huehls (2008), in "Foer, Spiegelman, and 9/11's Timely Traumas," suggests that the conversations that take place in the narrative "deploy history to mitigate the forward- march of what many fear [...] a war without end" (p. 58). Foer's narrative, henceforth, revises history in order to relocate 9/11, while the event remains, to use Said's (1975) epithet, "autochthonous" (p. 356). At the same time, Said (1975) argues that such historical revision is an "interest in human collectivity," thus marking a beginning both in history and in narration (p. 357).

"Stuff that Happened to Me" is another involvement in human collectivity. In this scrapbook, Oskar creates his own historical record. It includes various news reports, a picture of a falling man and many other images that seemingly do not correlate to each other. Foer introduces this book as one way for re-accumulating events by emphasizing pictures rather than words. The inclusion of visual illustrations in Oskar's book creates notions of authority. Foer seems to propose that in post- 9/11 narratives this method of narrating through images is more relevant than words, where visual reflections of 9/11 authenticates incomprehensibility, and restructures meaning. Oskar's scrapbook becomes one resource that documents chaos in the wake of 9/11. Drawing on Said's (1975) analysis, Foer's work "involve[s] rethought forms of continuity, permanence, appropriation, vision, and revision" (p. 343). According to this, Foer's beginning is a self-conscious act of revising and appropriating history. In his endeavors to approach history and documents, Foer creates a beginning that is, as Said (1975) defines it, an intentional act of producing meaning (5). As Oskar rewrites his world in this scrapbook, a post- 9/11 beginning is introduced as well.

As a traumatized child, Oskar begins thinking negatively about the most ordinary scenes of New York:

There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I'm not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans. (Foer, 2005, p. 50)

This representation portrays symptoms of trauma, most notably, fear and ambivalence, which featured U.S. societies and the "West" in the wake of 9/11. The previous quotation includes a generalization about Arab people mitigated by the contradictory statement: "I'm not racist." In this quotation, we see that ordinary scenes lose their ordinary implications in the wake of 9/11, and acquired new ones. It is a reference to could-be terrorists, where the words "Arab people" are repeated, and "turban" connotes Muslim people. In fact, at a certain moment in the narrative, Oskar declares that "Mohammed is the most common name on earth" (Foer, 2005, p. 171). The description also reiterates stereotypical portrayal that prevailed within post- 9/11 representations, thus, in Saidian terms, makes Foer's beginning largely a "continuity." However, the islamophobic sentiment expressed by Oskar is eliminated by him being a child. It seems that Foer's strategic choice of a child-narrator makes the confessions above less racist. At the same time, Foer's choice operates effectively in reflecting a larger political scene, yet from a child's perspective. In a beginning, Said (1975) argues, a "political history" can be "reduced" and appropriated to fit the demands of "a condition of mind, an inner state" (p. 110). Again, traumatized Oskar is reiterating a stereotypical "condition" about the historical and political image of Arabs and Muslims in the West.

Actually, in reaction to their trauma, Oskar and his grandfather resort to writing letters. Oskar frequently writes to well-known persons such as Stephen Hawking and Ringo Starr when he expresses his thoughts and feelings. Thomas's letters to his son, similarly, are manifestations of his true feelings. They also disclose a personal chapter in the history of Dresden. In the two cases, writing letters enables the writer to get more freedom to express, many times, confess, document and, perhaps, understand. Consequently, letters in Foer's work secure a space for testimonies. They also lend themselves as means of initiating connections with others. Based on Said's theory, writing is an "intentional act" of rendering inexpressible trauma through language of letters.

These letters, as well, entail self-reflexive associations to writing as well as reading after 9/11. Drawing on Said's theory, using letters:

testifies to an active search [...] for a nonnarrative way of dealing with nonnarratable units of knowledge. [...] the very acts of apprehending knowledge, whether as that which is written or as that which is read, are filled with combinations of uncertainty and invention. (Said, 1975, p. 282)

Based on Said's analysis, Foer endorses letters, a "nonnarrative" tool, to highlight both acts, writing and reading, in a pursuit to capture an evasive meaning, i.e. knowledge, whereby invention is part of that pursuit. Letters and books inside Foer's text, in fact, provide a space to express the repressed and inexpressible, and satisfy a desire to transcend, or perhaps, repudiate reality by re-beginning a new one.

Oskar himself is notably interested in beginnings. After reading Hawking's book, Oskar declares that one of his "favorite parts is the beginning of the first chapter, where Stephen Hawking tells about a famous scientist who was giving a lecture about how the earth orbits the sun, and the sun orbits the solar system, and whatever" (Foer, 2005, p. 25). Indeed, he resorts to science to create and recreate beginnings. Oskar on many occasions imagines creative devices that would keep people safe in case of another terrorist threat. He is trying to soothe his anxiety by creating solutions, thus using what Said (1975) calls "Archemidian instruments" (p. 50). Many of those inventions are informed by ideas that could have saved his father's life. Oskar is traumatized by the fact that he does not know anything about how his father was killed in the 9/11 attacks. In other words, through inventing, Oskar creates "empirical, verifiable, concrete – beginning" (Foer, 2005, p. 25). Science becomes Oskar's point of departure from which he initiates beginnings and finds answers to questions that his anxiety poses.

However, when Oskar's pursuit leads to nothing, he becomes skeptical about inventing. In one of his letters to Stephen Hawking, Oskar raises the question "What if I never stop inventing?" To this question Hawking replies: "What's real? What isn't real? Maybe those aren't the right questions to be asking. What does life depend on? I wish I had made things for life to depend on. What if you never stop inventing? Maybe you're not inventing at all" (Foer, 2005, p. 318-319). This response of Hawking proposes a possibility that Oskar is creating truths without even knowing it. In a post- 9/11 world, inventing/narrating becomes a life-saving indulgence where coping with a mysterious world depends on the created, the invented. In Said's (1975) view, inventing is necessarily linked to a beginning, where he asserts that "[o]nly by imagining (divining = inventing) a force anterior to our origin [...] we can begin to intend to be human" (p. 349).

In this way, the narrative embraces elements of magical realism. Oskar, for example, describes some of the pictures included in his scrapbook: "a shark attacking a girl, someone walking on a tightrope between the Twin Towers, [...] a soldier getting his head cut off in Iraq, the place on the wall where a famous stolen painting used to hang" (Foer, 2005, p. 56).

Oskar chooses particular pictures where he freezes time in them and documents his visual experiences. Perhaps Foer is suggesting that post- 9/11 meaning demands more than words to be produced efficiently. Visual devices are created in this narrative to rupture incomprehensible reality and compensate for an absence that the tragic attack forces. By interrupting narration this way, magical elements help supplement the narrative and enable meaning construction. This kind of documenting also underscores 9/11 as a "historical aboriginality."

Foer's narrative, in reality, addresses predicaments and problematic strategies of expression that emerged in a post-9/11 world. Foer is actually suggesting that the persistent effect of trauma is inevitably reflected in language where traumatized narrators are testifying and experimenting with language simultaneously. Oskar, for instance, keeps using the two adverbs "extremely" and "incredibly" repeatedly and interchangeably. The title of the narrative, evidently inaugurates this intensity. Oskar describes himself as being "EXTREMELY DEPRESSED" (184) and "INCREDIBLY ALONE" (Foer, 2005, p. 185).

Employing euphemisms to deviate reality is an additional element in Foer's "community of language." For example, Oskar uses the expression "heavy boots" to eschew adhering to unpleasant truths. Related to this, Sien Uytterschout (2008) argues in "Visualised Incomprehensibility of Trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*" Uytterschout asserts that Foer's work adapts to the new "task" of literature in post- 9/11 (p. 68). It reflects "(physical as well as mental) trauma scars" of traumatized narrators, where "the (fluency of the) narrative is 'scarred' with visual effects" (Uytterschout, 2008, p. 68). Appropriating language in this manner lends itself to the Saidian notion of language in a beginning that "provides us with a word whose meaning must be made" (Said, 1975, p. 76).

At the end of his pursuit, Oskar is offered no satisfying answers. However, he becomes able to confront the truth and returns to his dad's grave admitting that the secret behind his father's death will remain unsolved. Rewinding time while using the "flip book," though, satisfies Oskar's desire to reverse tragic events. In "Trauma, Ethics and Myth-Oriented Literary Tradition in Jonathan Safran Foer's '*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*,'" Francisco Collado-Rodriguez (2008) explains this particular case as he claims that American people refrained from "assimilating" and acceptance, and wanted to go back in memory "to a moment where they still had the opportunity to avoid the terrorist attacks" (p. 51). Another analysis is proposed by Earl G. Ingersoll (2009), in the essay "One Boy's Passage, and His Nation's: Jonathan Safran Foer's '*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.'" Ingersoll (2009) asserts that Oskar, through the "flip book," endeavors "to set the film projector in reverse" (p. 65). In Saidian words, yet, this creates a "circular" ending for the narrative, where a new "continuity" is introduced; a "reversibility" that is established on "a set of experiments in changing directions" (Said, 1975, p. 30). *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* thus becomes one derivation by a "Western" writer of a historical aboriginality; namely 9/11. In writing it, Foer "hopes to begin a restoration" of a post-9/11 world (Said, 1975, p. 187).

B. Beginning in Alia Yunis' *The Night Counter*

Alia Yunis' (2009) *The Night Counter* is the account of an Arab Muslim immigrant in the U.S. The narrative is a riff on The Arabian Nights and its magical world. It comments on the Arab-Muslim situation in a post- 9/11 U.S. In "Identity and Representational Dilemmas: Attempts to De-Orientalize the Arab," Jameel Alghaberi (2020) asserts that 9/11 "brought Arab Americans to a position that they could not have imagined. It marked the beginning of a new era that brought about unbearable changes and resulted in some Arab Americans becoming the victims of a popular

backlash” (p. 142). Specifically, Alghaberi (2020) asserts that 9/11 is a “turning point” for Muslim and Arab writing (p.156).

To cope with post- 9/11 challenges, Yunis’ narrative brings back Scheherazade to magically enable a post- 9/11 Arab-Muslim narrative in a Saidian beginning that conjoins an “obligation” for narration and “sympathetic imagination.” Through promoting storytelling as an Arab art, Yunis’ text incorporates a number of Arab-Muslim experiences to counter stereotypical, many times distorted representations of Arabs and Muslims as rendered by an angry “West.” In this way, Yunis’ “beginning” accentuates different “molestations” of the 9/11’s grand narrative endeavoring to make sense of a political scene that has forced itself against the lives of Arabs and Muslims at the wake of 9/11. In *The Night Counter*, we meet Fatima, an Arab-Muslim immigrant, who lived in a pre- and a post- 9/11 U.S., thus witnessing the radical shift that impacted Arabs and Muslims living there. Yet, what she saw in those long years was never narrated until the arrival of Scheherazade.

“This woman, Scheherazade, of whom rawis—bards in villages from Iran to India—had spun tales since the time of the Caliph Rashid Al- Harun, was herself the greatest storyteller of all time” (Yunis, 2009, p. 12). By inviting Scheherazade into her text, Yunis (2009) underscores her intent to begin a counter testimony that could potentially stand against post- 9/11 islamophobic discourse, thus introduce her text as a political and historical record. Said (1975) says that a:

beginning as first point in a given continuity has exemplary strength equally in history, in politics, and in intellectual discipline – and perhaps each of these domains preserves the myth of a beginning utopia of some kind as a sign of its distinct identity. To have begun means to be the first to have done something. (p. 32)

For sure, Yunis is “the first” for many reasons. First, she invites Scheherazade into her narrative and transforms her into a listener that can stimulate an Arab-Muslim past which is silenced by the distorting narrative of 9/11. In *The Night Counter*, Fatima narrates and Scheherazade listens. Drawing on Said’s theory, Yunis’ beginning in this way is a “reversal” (Said, 1975, p. 30). Said (1975) explains this by emphasizing that a “thought can reverse itself, proceed to claim that the order of things can also be summarily reversed,” while such reversibility is actually intended “in order to make a point or move in a new direction” (p. 30). Scheherazade becomes the perpetuator of Fatima by listening to the episodes of her past, and returns every night, wanting to hear more of Fatima’s stories. A second layer of Yunis’ being “the first” is her method of deploying Scheherazade’s magical powers to augment Fatima’s narration. Fatima can know more of the daily lives of her children through Scheherazade’s journeys on her flying carpet around the U.S. Third, by introducing a plethora of stories about her children, the old matriarch begins a new history.

In Scheherazade, Fatima finds an opportunity to articulate untold stories of the past and sustain her life. Accordingly, Scheherazade’s narration, in a Saidian sense, becomes a “point of departure” for Yunis’ text as Fatima’s narrative begins as a modern version of *The Arabian Nights*. To choose Scheherazade in particular is to “ascertain an actual point of historical departure (called today the search for roots)” (Said, 1975, p. 350). This “historical departure” is valorized as it augments the “aboriginality” of 9/11. In Yunis’ narrative, Scheherazade prompts Fatima’s inexhaustible history, and this becomes an act of “historical understanding.” Additionally, Scheherazade initiated magical stories for 1,001 nights to save her own life. Similarly, Fatima in the narrative spends each night telling Scheherazade her life stories while she is fully aware that the 1,001st night is the end of her narrating. Until that day comes, *The Night Counter* becomes Fatima’s *Arabian Nights*. By resorting to the figure of Scheherazade, Yunis pushes Fatima out from the margins, and provides her with an opportunity to enter history through narrating. In reality, Scheherazade teaches Fatima the art of narrating, and guides her into discovering how her memory enables an Arab-Muslim history, hence, creates a beginning. Such discovery, based on Said’s theory, is “to write in and as an act of discovery rather than out of respectful obedience to established ‘truth’” (Said, 1975, p. 379).

In fact, Yunis’ narrative encompasses an Arab-Muslim diversity over the course of around a century. In a Scheherazadian manner, Fatima’s musings about her children bring about a collection of mini stories. Whether they are doctors, runaways, peace activists, shoplifters, war veterans or even housewives, Fatima’s children are mostly hiding their real identities in a post-9/11 U.S., floundering in traditions, and, in some rare cases, struggling to embrace their real identities.

Although these stories that Fatima narrates about members in her family initiate new possibilities for reconfiguring Arab’s heritage in the U.S., they are chaotically dispersed in the narrative, where one beginning abruptly leads to another. Vinson (2014), in “Re-Encountering Scheherazade”: Gender, Cultural Mobility, and Narrative Transformations in Alia Yunis’s *The Night Counter*, claims that it is the presence of both Scheherazade and Fatima which “triggers a series of astonishing coincidences and tragicomic misunderstandings that provide the occasion for comedic re-evaluations of both Arab American history” (p. 61). To use Said’s terminology, this web of intricate accounts makes Yunis’ narrative a “hysterically deliberate” beginning as it is always “postponed with a kind of encyclopedic meaningfulness” (Said, 1975, p. 43-44). Amir, for instance, is an aspiring actor who deploys stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims. Randa, on the other hand, leads a kind of American-style life, “doing all the right things for maximum public viewing” (Yunis, 2009, p. 161). However, Fatima’s great granddaughter, Decimal, is an exception. Decimal does not subscribe to coping mechanisms, and strives to know more of her history.

Fatima details these stories and many others, aided by Scheherazade eavesdropping. Further, confessions of her children in the narrative, offer the “meaningfulness” needed to reflect the chaotic situation of Arabs and Muslims at the

wake of 9/11. Most of their confessions feature their desire to assimilate. Yet, this desire is countered by ramifications of prejudice that ripple through the days of the Abdullah family. Mistakenly, their dramas are considered a source for national-security concerns, thus eliciting the FBI spying. Firstly, Amir is the primary subject of the FBI investigation. Then, a comprehensive investigation of the entire Abdullah family begins, where minor incidents in their lives become a cause of concern. Commenting on this, Hilal (2020), in “Mirroring Hybridity: The use of Arab Folk Tradition in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* and Alia Yunis's *The Night Counter*,” states that the FBI investigation of Amir and his family is stimulated by the idea that Arabs and Muslims are a “threatening Other, where occurrences are extracted from their context and woven together as part of an incriminating narrative” (p. 265).

Remarkably, while many post- 9/11 narratives take this issue seriously, and many times dramatically, Yunis decides to tackle it sarcastically. Mistaken identities, cross-cultural misunderstandings and even conflating role playing with real behavior are some of the many chaotic episodes throughout the narrative. The best illustration of this is when the agents closely watch Amir through a window as he is rehearsing for a movie role as a terrorist. This chaos is intentionally captured by Yunis. In his book, Said (1975) explains that in a “hysterically deliberate” a beginning there is “a large number of repetitive phenomena that are continuously appearing with such disconcerting randomness as to seem chaotic. In the mindlessness of their repetition [...] they cannot – and perhaps should not – correspond to or fulfill preestablished laws, or desires” (p. 311). In total “meaningfulness,” Yunis (2009) mocks systems of stereotyping Arabs and Muslims after the 9/11 attacks. In such way, the issue of victimhood is reconfigured as the family’s efforts to assimilate are countered by “preestablished” ideas about them. In precise words, Yunis challenges such systems by employing a “disconcerting randomness” where the so called U.S.’s “Multiculturalism” is countered by real practices of its authorities. Hilal (2020) emphasizes that Yunis invests in “the malleability of the 1001 framework,” not to mention the “multiple timeframes and spaces” which actually destabilizes the official narrative that “excludes” Arabs and Muslims (p. 270).

Still, Yunis’ method of defusing stereotypes assigned to Scheherazade is, indeed, the most essential part of her beginning. Vinson (2014) calls this the “endless Orientalist permutations of Scheherazade’s image in America” (p. 61). As a post- 9/11 beginning, Yunis’ narrative indulges in a historical and political act of revision and re-writing. In reality, Yunis “attempts to reshape and reframe the degenerative Orientalist images of Arabs from within the American society itself. *The Night Counter* [...] investigates the various alterations of Scheherazade’s image that continually reappear in the United States” (Alghaberi, 2016, p. 154). To achieve this, Yunis gives Scheherazade a contemporary personality, so that she can gain access to the mainstream American culture. Throughout the narrative, Yunis deconstructs the orientalist depiction of Scheherazade, and “the image of the silenced Arab and Muslim woman by tracing the historical trajectory of Arab Americans who have been part of the American landscape and disrupting one dimensional and politically charged narratives, thus weaving them into inclusive frame stories” (Hilal, 264). As a result, Scheherazade enables a multi-dimensional narrative, and resumes an Arab-Muslim history. Before Fatima dies, Scheherazade asks her: “It was your collection of your greatest stories. May I share them with others?” “Inshallah,” Fatima said. “Inshallah,” Scheherazade replied” (Yunis, 2009, p. 369). With these words, Fatima’s narrative is launched by Scheherazade. Consequently, *The Night Counter* becomes part of a larger Arab-Islamic structure. Through the invocation of Shahrazad, Yunis’ text acquires what Said (1975) describes as “the volume to authorize statements, or utterances, or further writing” (p. 258). Said (1975) explains that a “volume” in a particular beginning text:

is a sort of historical a priori fact permitting the formulation of new statements. It is a rule-bound order that does not, however, deny the writer the power to innovate. The writer’s role, paradoxically, is to use the subtle constraints of his [her] discourse (the text’s volume) to expand their reach, to make his [her] discourse capable of repeating its present and its rules in new ways. (p. 258)

To mention discourse invites considering the language that *The Counter Night* creates. Generally, *The Night Counter* targets stereotypes related to Arabs and Muslims after the 9/11 attacks, and defuses them through a humorous language. Particularly, the narrative revises certain vocabulary that gained attention after 9/11. For example, Yunis (2009) employs the words “covering,” “misleading” or “masquerading,” while many times punning on the headscarf of Muslim women. Evidently, Yunis (2009) subverts the islamophobic discourse that emerged after the attacks by deploying the elasticity of certain vocabulary. By doing so, Yunis creates a counter discourse that revises fear of “covering,” both as a reaction against Muslims who are covered in “Islamic” clothes, and as a reaction by Muslims themselves wanting to cover their identities.

Yunis (2009) also deploys elements of the Arabic folklore narration in order to counter islamophobic and anti-Arab rhetoric, for instance, the “*kan ma kan*” narration (Yunis, 2009, p. 369), and the “*Oh, child, do not marry a stranger you meet. Our chaff is better than foreign wheat,*” notorious pleading of old Arab grandmothers (Yunis, 2009, p. 234). Yunis (2009) does additionally affirm an Arab-Muslim identity through introducing words from Arabic within English framework, i.e., transliteration: “*Allah Yustar,*” “*nushkar rabna,*” “*Inshallah,*” “*ibni,*” “*Khallas.*” Hence, Yunis creates her beginning language, immerses it within an American context and re-writes the dominant narrative. The two previous forms of immersion, rendered through language, emphasize Yunis’ idea about a need for assimilation rather than exclusion of Arabs and Muslims in a post- 9/11 U.S. To create a “community of language,” Said (1975) argues, is to “formulate concepts, by exploiting the ability of language to indicate (actually, to assert) the existence of continuity

and concept alongside dispersion and particularity” (p. 38). In her narrative, Yunis (2009) enables a silenced narrative, and accords Arabic the right to be heard, though within a context of English letters.

In actuality, the narrative focuses on beginning vocabulary (*kan ma kan*), and diminishes endings. After Scheherazade appears to her, Fatima knows that that she has begun a new era of her days. Although Fatima wishes that Scheherazade will tell her how her death will eventually be, Fatima reaches the conclusion that life is not about how we end, rather it is about how we begin and sustain our experiences through narrating. This vocabulary of beginnings challenges endings that resemble 9/11 and any fixed meaning pertaining to that day. Based on Said’s perception, to begin is in reality to indulge in a circular activity where one word will create another and one beginning will “breed” continuities, but never endings (Said, 1975, p. 202). Fatima’s encounters with Scheherazade reveal that narrating is a beginning act that keeps begetting more stories. In effect, Yunis’ narrative is an illustration of what Said (1975) describes as “a form of perpetual writing, always at the beginning” (p. 261).

We can see that “Fatima’s story becomes the frame story from which her children’s stories stem. For both Scheherazade and Fatima, storytelling is an act of agency. They control the construction of their narratives” (Vinson, 2014, p. 264). In such “encyclopedic” narration, Yunis’ beginning produces more beginnings. This also means that the art of narrating, for Arabs and Muslims, is not only an act of survival, but also an act of “control.” To dwell on this idea is also to recall Said’s identification of the “new-gained and constantly experienced authority” in a beginning (Said, 1975, p. 92). Fatima’s narration is empowered by Scheherazade’s, and both narrators change and “control” the course of events in a transactional authority.

At the end of the narrative, we reach a conclusion that all forms of storytelling make “fables” of our lives. Scheherazade closes with the assertion that “everyone’s story begins *kan ma kan*, once upon time. When your story starts with that, your life becomes a fable to those with only a trace of your blood” (Yunis, 2009, p. 369). For Said, a “fable” is a text that “strictly speaking not a historical narrative, nor an entirely fanciful invention, nor an unimportant embellishment of morals [...]. The fable is a figured language, it is communal, it has a kind of repeatable originality” (1975, p. 356). Through Yunis’ narrative, a counter narrative begins, in literature, in history and in politics, with an immortal Arab-Muslim storyteller, whose “heart eternally beating” (Yunis, 2009, p. 369).

III. CONCLUSION

Although both narratives differ in form and theme, generally, they share an urge to begin in producing meaning. As a result, both Foer (2005) and Yunis (2009) resorted to magical/ surreal worlds to compensate a void that 9/11 introduced. They also indulged in a self-reflexive act of historical and political revision, rewriting and inscribing a different history. Foer’s narrative expressed a remarkable case of trauma that included an unrelenting collective memory and islamophobic sentiment. His language, additionally, reflected a shattered sense of security. Through the invocation of Shcehrazade, Yunis (2009) ambivalently situated herself as a mediator between an angry “West” and a misrepresented “Islam.” She resorted to a humanistic rhetoric that could counter post- 9/11 hostility and hatred discourse towards Arabs and Muslims. Such rhetoric seemed useful in eschewing a defensive discourse. Both narratives, eventually, reflected the post- 9/11 new consciousness and introduced their texts as “beginnings.”

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