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Getting Out of an Airport or a Romance: Representing the Post-9/11 America and Its Limitation in Lisa Halliday's *Asymmetry*

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In Lisa Halliday's debut novel, *Asymmetry* (2018), the three sections are led by different protagonists: Alice, Amar, and Ezra. This paper first investigates how the "asymmetries" presented in the novel come together. It then discusses how the post-9/11 airport transformed and became a form of "prison" for Amar by employing Foucauldian concepts. Finally, it argues that Alice's leaving of her romantic partner, Ezra, for her creative freedom occurs in a way that can make us turn a critical eye to Alice for writing a rather tragic ending for Amar, because of the novel's metafictional nature. This suggests that while the attempt to depict someone like Amar may be admired, no easy solutions to create a post-9/11 narrative are available.

Keywords: Airport/Metafiction/Terrorism

Introduction

More than two decades have passed since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, shook the world, and one can easily say that the aftershock remains strong in the memories of Americans. Since the dawn of the 21st century, novelists have challenged themselves to depict the post-9/11 America in a way that perhaps only fiction can.

In 2018, American novelist Lisa Halliday published her debut novel, *Asymmetry*. The book was met with wide appraisal from critics and was even listed in "The 10 Best Books of 2018" in the *New York Times Books Review*. As we will discuss in detail later, one cannot ignore the fact that the book became popular at first, perhaps because of its affiliation with the famous Jewish American novelist Philip Roth. However, a careful reading of this book proves that it has just as much to say about a Roth-esque character as about how we perceive and consume stories of those victimized in the post-9/11 world.

Asymmetry is unevenly divided into three sections. In the first section, the protagonist, Alice, a young woman working as a publishing editor, meets Ezra Blazer, a famous American novelist modeled after Philip Roth. In spite of their age difference, they begin to be romantically involved. With the teachings and encouragement of the renowned literary figure,

Alice's transformation from an editor to a writer begins in this section.

The second section focuses on a completely different man named Amar Jaafari, an economist en route to Kurdistan from the United Kingdom, departing from Heathrow Airport. He is detained by immigration authorities because of a baseless accusation of having some possible affiliation with terrorists.

In the third section, the focus returns to Ezra in 2011. He is now the guest of the BBC radio program "Desert Island Discs," during which we discover that Ezra finally won the Nobel Prize for Literature. In short, the central figure of each section constantly switches, starting the novel with Alice and then with Amar and, finally, Ezra, providing the readers with fragments of the whole picture.

In this paper, we first analyze the relationships between the three main characters in order to understand how one's action influences another's to entangle how they all come together in the end. We then discuss how the word *asymmetry* comes to represent the situations of Alice and Amar, who are in dire need of getting out of a romance and an airport, respectively. Finally, by considering how Halliday put together her seemingly separate yet somehow connected stories, we posit that Halliday presents the possibility and limitation of how one can write about another during the era of the war on terror in a way that perhaps only a semi-biographical metafiction such as that of Halliday can achieve.

1. Ezra and Alice, or Roth and Halliday

As mentioned earlier, the novel was met with positive reviews overall. For example, Alice Gregory of the *New York Times* writes that Halliday's work is "a transgressive roman à clef, a novel of ideas and a politically engaged work of metafiction," by suggesting how each section of the novel might be interconnected. Parul Sehgal of the same newspaper outlet also hints at the structure of the novel and concludes that "[I] like it or not, [the novel] will make you a better reader, a more active noticing. It hones your senses."

However, we should remind ourselves that possibly what has intrigued the critics and readers of this novel is the relationship between Alice and Ezra or rather what may have gone on between Lisa Halliday and Philip Roth. Willa Paskin, for instance, says, "I don't want to suggest that *Asymmetry* is about Philip Roth, or that it contains the real Philip Roth, or the only Philip Roth, but it does contain a Philip Roth that you may not have seen before — and this glimpse of him is lovely." We can say that Paskin refrains from thinking that the depiction of Ezra *does* somehow reveal the hidden side of Philip Roth, but she still reads the novel as

something presenting a version of Roth that she finds interesting.

To be fair, this kind of curiosity is understandable because it had been almost a decade since Philip Roth stopped writing new novels and people were perhaps curious to read a story with somebody like Roth at the center of it. Although in an interview, Halliday herself claims that the story of Alice and Ezra has many invented elements. This also means that she, nevertheless, wrote the story partially on the basis of her experiences (Alter). Regarding the examples above, it is important that these reviews are under the constraint of not revealing the novel's ending or overall structure too much. Without focusing on how the three sections of the novel come together, it is not difficult to understand why one may read or review this novel, wondering how much of the first section happened between Halliday and Roth.

Among such criticisms, however, we can still find some literature that discusses in detail the whole structure of the novel. For instance, Ayten Tartici makes her argument based on the fact that the three parts of the novel are interconnected and that in the second part, Amar is in fact the protagonist of the novel within a novel that Alice from the first part wrote (158). How the three parts are intertwined is revealed through small but significant details in the novel, such as watching or listening to news about post-9/11 America or references to the same books and magazines in both Alice's and Amar's sections, most notably Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, whose paraphrases and stylistic influences can be found in the novel (Tartici 158). In a way, we go down into Alice's rabbit hole, discovering that her adventure becomes much deeper and even has multiple layers.

2. Alice Getting Out of Her “Adventure”

Next, we will discuss how Alice begins to write for herself without being under the control of Ezra to further understand the dynamism between the main characters of this novel. The relationship between Alice and Ezra began only as a casual conversation between her trying to read a book and him eating an ice cream, but it soon becomes a relationship in which he financially supports her from time to time, such as handing her cash for her air-conditioning or even paying off her college loans, and gives her a reading list or bags full of books to read. Though not interested in writing about her own life, Alice eventually starts writing, wondering “whether a former choirgirl from Massachusetts might be capable of conjuring the consciousness of a Muslim man” (71). From this point, she begins to contemplate more on the nature of her relationship, thinking that other people might see her as “a healthy young woman losing time with a decrepit old man” (71). All the while, Ezra never publicizes their

relationship, even referring to her as “my goddaughter” at one point (121).

In the final scene of the first section, we find Ezra hospitalized after having chest pain, and he tells Alice, “Don’t leave me. Don’t go. I want a partner in life. Do you know? We’re just getting started. No one could love you like I do. Choose *this*. Choose the adventure, Alice. *This* is the adventure. This is the *misadventure*. This is living” (123). However, assuming from Ezra’s BBC interview, she did not, in fact, “choose the adventure” or “the misadventure.”

We can only imagine what that adventurous path would have led her to, but it remains true that he had already established himself as the famous novelist and tried to keep a young woman as his girlfriend on top of that. If we were to say that trying to enjoy those two things without risking losing either is what constitutes his “adventure,” then the discrepancy between Ezra and Alice here would be quite apparent. Simply put, his adventure is just keeping the status quo, but Alice has more to lose here because prioritizing this relationship may jeopardize her future career as a novelist.

Ezra’s manipulative rhetoric is present throughout the novel. This novel ends with Ezra saying, “So. What do you say, miss? Are you game?” (271), to the BBC interviewer on air. As Tartici points out, this can be traced back to the words from Philip Roth’s 2006 novella *Everyman* (159). The male protagonist in the book says, “How game are you?” (132), to a much younger woman, resembling the situation in *Asymmetry*. Given that Ezra and Alice start the first phase of their relationship with him saying, “So. Miss Alice. Are you game?” (5), his usage of the word *game* is not uncommon to him, thus making it clear that whatever is taking place between Alice and Ezra is not quite serious but something for him to enjoy like a “game” or an “adventure.”

As Alice says to Ezra, “You’ve taught me so much, and you’re the best friend I have. I just can’t ... It’s so not ... *normal*” (122), she understands that because she lacks the power to change the game itself, she now needs to step down from the game she was in and turn back from whatever adventure or misadventure Ezra desires for both of them. This is not to say that he clearly discourages her from writing or that the relationship between them turns explicitly abusive suddenly, but the fact remains that she may never gain her creative freedom as long as she remains under his influence; getting out of this asymmetrical relationship is her only way to freedom.

3. The Misadventure of Amar

To dissect how the life of Alice, the author/creator, and that of Amar, the creation, interacts

with one another, we focus on the depiction of the airport and how that setting renders itself a special meaning to *Asymmetry*. As mentioned earlier, Amar is detained at the Heathrow Airport and refused entry to the United Kingdom. A clearance officer explains to him, "I'm afraid my chief is not satisfied that you are not here for reasons you have not disclosed to us" (235). To be sure, there does not seem to be anyone in the authority who expresses overt racism or abuses their power by using physical force toward the detainee. However, the problem remains deeply rooted in the racially motivated bureaucratic system, and Amar is made to suffer as a result. At the end of this section, we find Amar still in the holding room, unable to board any plane leaving for his desired destination.

Before advancing our discussion, we can quickly remind ourselves that before the attack, it was not necessary for ordinary passengers to be checked thoroughly in American airports; they did not need to show their IDs or tickets multiple times throughout the boarding process or go through metal detectors. However, after September 11, 2001, security became much stricter in the attempt to weed out any potential threat (Schaper). By employing Michel Foucault's analysis of prisons, Lilia Mironov argues that, even though the restrictions are beginning to be loosened nearly after two decades, the impact of the 9/11 attack was so immense that terminals essentially became giant panopticons¹⁾ (130). Foucault's ideas appear to resonate with much of how we regard airports as atypical places where authorial powers explicitly come into play.

In fact, Mark B. Salter analyzes real-life modern international airports on the basis of Foucault's concepts of heterotopias and the confessionary complex. Heterotopia refers to places that "have the curious property of being in relation with all other sites, but in such a way to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relation that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (Foucault 24). Salter posits that "within this multifaceted environment dominated by doctrines of risk management and customer service, the confessionary complex facilitates the self-policing of transiting individuals and that the overlapping and obscured lines of authority subtly restrict the possibilities of resistance" (49).

The main character, Amar, tries to pass through such a place, and we may add that Alice, the author of the novel in *Asymmetry*, and perhaps Lisa Halliday, the author of *Asymmetry*, are making an effort not to depict him as a one-sided character going through such an ordeal. In fact, the novel provides us with more details about Amar's past than that of Alice or Ezra,

1) As a matter of fact, the word *panopticon* can be found in the novel: "There was no mention of air-raid sirens, or cruise missiles whistling across the sky, for life in a panopticon has long conditioned Iraqis to believe that the walls have ears and the windows have eyes and you never know when the watchmen are off duty, so you assume they are always on. Less convincingly, the panopticon was also blamed for my brother's long silences" (161).

which can help explain why the second part of the book is the longest.

By reading the part on Amar, we can see that Alice depicts Amar as one whose life has always been and will always be somewhat connected to terminals and airplanes, whether he likes it or not. For example, he was literally on a plane at the time of his birth; his Iraqi mother was on an airplane flying into United States territory when she gave birth to Amar (132). Thus, he was given two nationalities and, naturally, two passports.

As Amar himself explains, “perhaps as compensation for their rootlessness, babies born on planes are granted free flights on the parturitive airline for life” (132). Although Amar seems to be joking about this rumor, he understands that having dual nationalities can make people more or less “rootless,” perhaps stuck between the two countries in conflict with each other. That is what exactly happens to him: he is stuck between America and Iraq, the attacker and the attacked in the Iraq War, respectively (although the United States may well likely claim that Iraq is the one who started it all). This situation with Amar has to do with his identity, the sense of who he really is, but being affiliated with Iraq and owning two different passports propose a problem with the British authorities. They then confiscate his passports without any clear consent from him. As a result, he is not only never offered “free flights” for his being born in U.S. air but also denied traveling even as a legitimate paying customer.

Moreover, this second part interweaves Amar being questioned repeatedly and remembering his family history, implying that his life is deeply connected to the post-9/11 world affairs. Amar and his family go through ordeals caused by the war against terror, which, of course, are in stark contrast with Alice’s situation, in which she learns about bombings in the United Kingdom and Iraq only in parts through news (109, 119). In addition, we learn a great deal about Amar’s life through his first-person narration, including facts about his relationship with his brother, Sami, who eventually goes missing; meeting with the war journalist Alastair (whom Amar is trying to meet in the United Kingdom with no success); recalling his time with Amar’s girlfriend, Maddie; and the sudden death of his kidnapped uncle. We may even say that more backstories are written of Amar than of Ezra and Alice combined. All in all, in the novel, as an aspiring writer, Alice attempts to create an Iraqi American male character with enough details and stories to stand alone as one whole novella.

What is important here is that the narrative on Amar ends with him still in Heathrow; everything remains stalled, as he is not sure when he can get on a plane to eventually get to Iraq. In other words, he is neither in America, where he left from, nor in Iraq, where he wants to go; instead, he is stuck in a foreign land, the United Kingdom. As discussed earlier, the nature of a modern international airport is unlike what we see elsewhere. An Amar’s case, the

airport authority, embodied by the immigration officer named Denise, keeps questioning Amar while telling him that there is “no problem” and what she is doing is “[j] ust some inquiries” (168). As that process gets repeated, Amar goes deeper and deeper into the building until he reaches “the end of the metal maze” (166), but this just means that he is stuck in this massive maze. This “confessional complex” tries to have Amar “confess” his true motivation, or plot of some sort, by repeatedly asking details of his plan to Kurdistan, except he has nothing to confess about. As Salter explains, professionals agree that “a terrorist attack by a determined, dedicated suicide bomber cannot be prevented or deterred” (62). This means that because the authority is trying to accomplish a fundamentally impossible task and nobody can prove his innocence, there is no end in sight for this arduous process that Amar is subjected to.

By contrast, Ezra is at the height of his career in the third section. At least in the first section, where Ezra becomes romantically involved with Alice, he was depicted as a titan in modern American literature who is repeatedly “robbed of” his Nobel Prize (83). The same man, who seemed physically quite feeble and at the brink of personal downfall at the end of the first section, made a radio appearance as the recent Nobel laureate. Taking into account that Philip Roth never got his prize despite public expectations, this liberty that Halliday takes with her in her debut novel is significant in how she chooses to depict Ezra. His confidence seeps through his inappropriate remarks toward a married female host during the show, flirting with her and even asking her on a date. “A reader can’t help but be disappointed,” Maggie Doherty posits, “that Ezra is not as generous or considerate as Alice has represented — or imagined — him to be” (193).

Comparing the two vastly different situations, what is remarkable is that Ezra and Amar are both Americans in Britain, but while Ezra can answer a hypothetical question luxuriously, such as what he would listen to or read if he were all alone on a desert island, imagining himself to be in an extreme situation without being forced to go or stay anywhere, Amar is in an actual situation where he cannot even leave the terminal. From the novel’s structural viewpoint, he is stuck between the first and third sections, unable to go anywhere, with his story ending in limbo. With such evidence, the novel presents an asymmetry²⁾.

4. Representing Lives in the Metafiction

So far, we have advanced our discussion by trying to make sense of each asymmetry posed

2) Touching upon this theme, Jeffery Clapp writes, “Perhaps Amar’s capture by Alice is emanation of the seduction of Alice by Ezra in the first part of the book, one of the ugly parallels that gives the book its name” (5).

in the novel *Asymmetry*. In this final chapter, we argue that the novel tackles the possibility and limitations of how one can depict people suffering from the war on terror outside of their situation in a way that only metafictional novels can.

Surely, we could argue that there is the issue of representation of the oppressed by focusing on the fact that Alice, a white woman, is trying to give life to a non-white man and how she seems to feel about it. Tartici uses the word “ventriloquizing” to describe such a situation, and this theme can be found throughout the novel (159). For example, Ezra says that Alice’s novel is “[a] bout the extent to which we’re able to penetrate the looking-glass and imagine a life” and “a kind of veiled portrait of someone determined to transcend her provenance, her privilege, her naiveté” (261). Tartici concludes that “the key” of writing about others, in a rather self-aware manner, “lies in precise representation of the words we speak and how we choose to say them” (162).

In a similar vein, Maggie Doherty sees a new stream of metafiction by female writers. Inserting multiple perspectives into the novels helps us question and take down the authority of male-centric narratives, which in *Asymmetry*’s case is Ezra’s, and “paradoxically, the more multivocal and less ‘authoritative’ a work of art is, the more illuminating an account it can be” (Doherty 201).

Considering the points presented, Halliday appears to have incorporated the form of metafiction with aspects of her real-life experiences. However, as we discussed the unsettling power balance of how each character comes together, to uncritically call Alice finishing her first novel a triumph of some kind would be missing the point. If we were made to believe that Ezra was not quite how he seemed to be at first because of how the novel portrayed the BBC interview, then perhaps we may also think in a similar way about Alice. Making use of the fact that each section focuses on a different person, Halliday seems to be inserting some kind of critique from a perspective other than that of Alice, the writer herself, in the form of a metafictional novel.

Metafiction is, as Patricia Waugh defines, “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” and such works “have tended to embody dimensions of self-reflexivity and formal uncertainty” (2). Readers should be well aware of the fact that what they have in front of them is a piece of fiction, but they suspend their disbelief to fully immerse themselves into the world that the book provides, but the artificiality of metafictions prevents them from doing so, invoking “a critical discourse about various aspects of art and the artistic process” (17). In short, metafiction novels usually invite

readers to engage actively with the text critically. Indeed, the concept itself is nothing new, but as Doherty mentioned, the genre can update itself, and the updated version can provide readers with a kind of perspective quite different from what came before.

As discussed earlier, Alice's act of writing is her struggle to transcend the privilege of being white. However, whether she succeeds in doing so proves to be a different matter, and Ezra himself does not give a clear answer to this, simply moving on to another question in the radio program. He just drops a hint or instruction, so to speak, as to how we are supposed to approach Alice's writing³⁾.

After all, as a result of Alice ending her relationship with Ezra, it would be safe to say that while she gained her own independence as a novelist, she breathes life into a character who is completely different from her, only to essentially imprison him in a modern British airport. In reading *Asymmetry* along with another contemporary metafiction, Jeffery Clapp writes, with Amar's captivity in mind, that he "would like to think of autofiction … as a trap" (2), and he poses that "the reader of autofiction watches the author capture and violate other parties to the manuscript. But even more. Insofar as a text is autofictional, it traps prey, and this is why we read it. If our initial investment in the work is an autobiographical one, we read on to see the pain of others" (21).

In addition, Halliday's choice to formulate her own autofictional narrative, partly inspired by her personal experiences with Roth himself, should add another context here. This kind of metafiction, with the hint of self-reflexivity, should feel familiar to the readers of Philip Roth's novels, as Doherty also mentions in her analysis (198). The protagonists of his novels are very often alter-egos of Philip Roth, who constantly blur the line between what is fiction and real, sometimes even criticizing the author Roth himself in his writing.

Nathan Zuckerman is perhaps Roth's most famous alter-ego, as numerous novels were written with Zuckerman, either as the protagonist or narrator. This is not to say that Roth never appears in his novels as himself. In his 1993 novel *Operation Shylock*, Philip Roth himself goes to Israel, hoping to track down his supposed doppelganger, someone who calls himself Philip Roth. The alternate historical novel *The Plot Against America* (2004) imagines the United States, where Charles Lindberg, not Franklin Roosevelt, wins the 1941 presidential election, taking the country in a completely different direction, with a young Philip Roth observing everything unfolding. Roth also wrote a number of "non-fiction" books, although he never hesitated to incorporate fiction into his facts. For instance, Nathan Zuckerman appears in Roth's biography

3) This seems fitting because the vast majority of Philip Roth's oeuvres were centered around Jewish men like himself, hardly a female protagonist and never a person of color.

The Facts (1988), outrightly criticizing Roth for his arbitrary choice of facts⁴⁾.

Given how his works were introduced during the radio program, it is difficult to be certain about how self-reflexive and metafictional his oeuvres are supposed to be. In some ways, those aspects of Roth in Ezra are not made as clear, but Halliday appears to steer us in a similar direction in how we are supposed to read Alice's work. Certainly, this does not mean that Halliday merely imitates what Roth had done. She is neither denying nor imitating Roth's literary accomplishment; rather, she is mixing her influences with her originality. The mere fact that Ezra in the BBC interview mentions and even praises Alice's debut work should indicate that they are in no way hostile toward each other (261).

How the novel poses such a question of representation and depiction of people who are not like them, we should add, gives us another insight as to why Amar's story is placed in this "asymmetrical" and complex three-part novel. In short, Alice and Ezra's intimate relationship develops and eventually comes to an end, which then gives Alice an opportunity to write her own novel, and Ezra wins the Nobel Prize for literature and makes an appearance on a BBC radio show.

However, as mentioned, the whole narrative comes with multiple layers and levels. Hence, we may posit that the complex structure of this novel is designed in a way that corresponds to the difficult and complicated nature of Alice depicting Amar. We are made to wonder if the author of the novel is already fully aware that it was only possible for Alice to create Amar's story, but it was done so at his expense, putting him inside a frame story, detaining him in a foreign country, and denying him the kind of freedom that Alice herself may have enjoyed⁵⁾.

Conclusion

Considering what we discussed above, let us answer the question, "Can a white Christian girl from New England [Lisa Halliday] accurately portray the consciousness of a male Muslim immigrant?" (Tartici 154). According to Tartici, the answer seems to be yes. According to our argument, the answer is also yes, but that comes with a cost, and this cost is what matters. The novel is written in a way that Alice succeeds in writing about a person outside of her world somewhat "accurately," but it also calls to attention that his story of *enclosure* in an airport

4) However, Matthew Shipe argues that in doing so, Roth "made an argument for the necessity of the novel, his fiction capturing the exhausting and, at times, maddening nature of American life in the closing decades of the twentieth century" (1). This kind of "necessity of the novel" may well resonate with Alice's motivation to write her own novel.

5) It may be worthwhile to point out that Amar, Alice, and even Alistair all share the same initial as the novel's title, indicating that they are, in some form or another, all connected to each other.

terminal is not given full *closure*, perhaps to show what a writer can and cannot do.

Such an effort of Alice, in other words, is her effort to depict the post-9/11 America as accurate and detailed as possible. In a way, that effort shows on the pages of this novel, but if the readers of this novel are mostly interested in the Alice-Ezra story and the surprise element for just the sake of surprise (of Alice having written Amar's story), then they again become bystanders to the system that remains hostile to people like Amar, just like the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq War remain as background noise to Alice's and Ezra's lives.

On a final note, the text leaves us with a gleam of hope that even our reading cannot completely deny: Amar's part is the only part written in the first person. If we are left to wonder who wrote the first part and when it was written, then we can say the same about the second part. Could it be that Amar became a storyteller of his own? The novel allows itself to accomplish a never-ending series of asymmetries, inviting more engagement from the readers.

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