

Laila Halaby's *Once in a promised land* as post 9/11 novel

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Abstract

The Gulf wars and the tragic event of 9/11, 2001 have impacted all Arabs especially in America, Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, many things have clearly changed in the USA since the horrifying attacks of 9/11 which hurt not only Americans, but also Arabs especially Muslims in the US, the Middle East and around the world. Arabs and Muslims living in the United States became suspect because of various terrorist acts on the one hand. On the other hand, many Americans became openly hostile to all Arab Americans after these attacks. Like the world changed after 9/11, literature also changed. This paper focuses on the increasing rise of Islam phobia after 9/11 and how these tragic events became responsible for the suffering of Arab Americans in the united States. Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* and Halaby's *Once in a promised land* show fear of the increasing resentment and racial discrimination against Arab Americans and challenge the western misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims by providing contrastive images. The gross deformation of Arabs in media and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 had significant ramifications on Arabs living in the US .These representations had been deep-rooted in the western minds.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Arab American fiction have taken a new turn to meet the prevalent anti-Arab racism and religious discrimination in the United States, especially after the September attacks and the American military involvement in the Middle East. There is a close link between the American foreign policy triggered by these events and the Arab Americans' need to voice concerns at how Arab minorities are treated in the post 9/11 hostile environment. In other words, they want to amplify their community's sense of social exclusion and religious discrimination, especially in the light of the political upheaval in the Arab world as a way of their awareness of this danger.

In fact, These political tensions such as the Gulf wars and 9/11 attacks, led to the increasingly strained relations between Arabs and non-Arabs. Undoubtedly, the September 11 terrorist attacks were no doubt a shock for the whole world. It was very traumatic for the Americans; the American response to these fateful attacks came as soon as George Bush's declaration his administration "War on Terror" to get rid of Osama Bin Laden who is taken to represent the figure of Islamic world. Things took a big turn for the worse after these events because Arabs, especially Muslims, became the focus of the American public. The post-9/11 backlash was absolutely horrible and heartbreaking.

Tuesday, September 11, 2001, stands as one of the darkest days in modern U.S. history. It will long be remembered by the millions of Americans who witnessed the collapse of the Twin Towers over and over on their television screens. For Middle Easterner and Muslim

Americans, "9/11" likewise signifies a shocking and sad day, but it also marks the beginning of a new era in which they became the victims of backlash. For many, the tragic events ushered in a period of hate crimes, profiling, and discrimination. Though stereotypes and discriminatory actions were not new to these minorities, the post-9/11 backlash was overwhelming and relentless (Bakalian 1).

In the aftermath of September 11, some legislations were enacted such as the Homeland Security Act I and II (2002). The stated purpose of these procedures was to deter and prevent any further attacks. In fact, these acts gave the president Bush virtually the unlimited power to discriminate against minorities, especially Arabs, and violate their civil liberties since the passage of these acts. Although the laws expressly condemned racial profiling against Arab Americans, they became the focus of suspicion and harassment. In other words, these acts cleared the way for the federal agents to arrest suspected terrorists and hold them indefinitely, including those who had no charges brought against them. Arab Americans were dismayed by the harsh racial discrimination against them. They viewed these acts as a declaration of war on the constitutional protections of Arabs, especially Muslims living in the united states.

Although the racial profiling against Arabs was nothing new, the backlash of this tragic event was very terrible. As mentioned before, anti-Arab racism long preceded 9/11 but "9/11 provided an ostensibly

empirical pretext to legitimize anti-Arab racism, but in no way did 9/11 actually create anti-Arab racism; 9/11 merely validated it" (Salita, Arab Americans 111). In other words, Arabs have a long history of racism in the United States but in post-9/11 America where the war on Terror was fiercely launched, Arabs have encountered a very raging wave of discrimination and racism that is often described to be the worst.

No one can deny the power of media on Americans because they were responsible for shaping the aggressive attitude of the westerners towards Muslims. Arabs of Muslim descent have been depicted in stereotypical and vilifying manners. In fact, media were always "a reliable source of antagonism" (Alsultany 2). As it is well known that the media has played a crucial role in dominating public attention or opinion and the coverage of the relevant issues were main reasons of xenophobia and hatred. In fact, "such hatred was essentially considered as patriotism"(Awan 526). In addition, many Americans want to "sacrifice their own civil liberties to fight the "War on Terror" (Cainkar146). In other words, the major problem is that the majority of Americans' gets their information from mass media and are greatly influenced by it. After September 11 terrorist attacks, 2001, Arab stereotyping was often vicious because all Muslims became associated with terrorism. In other words, the westerners make assumption that Muslims are fearfully violent according to the Noble Quran to prove that Muslims'terrorist violence is deeply rooted in their holy book.

As it is known that many people all over the world, including literary writers, were influenced by the 9/11 attacks. On the one hand, many 9/11 western novels were released after these attacks that dealt with these events directly or indirectly; for example, Don DLillo's Falling Man,

John Updike's Terrorist(2006). Such these works show how these attacks have scared the Americans only without examining their impact on Arabs in the United States. In other words, these works provide reductionist perceptions of all Arab Muslims and introduce them to the western reader through horrific images.

In other words, these texts reproduce the prevalent stereotypes about Arabs, especially Muslims, fostering intolerance towards Muslims in western writings and western media. Hollywood presented Arab men as terrorists ,villains, irrational, billionaire sheiks, irrational, abusive to women and noisy bargainers and Arab women as veiled and submissive. The result was a biased and skewed representation.

On the other hand, Arab writings in English try to indicate that these attacks have deeply affected Arabs, especially Muslims. Therefore, racial discrimination against Arabs dominate many Arab texts after these attacks. They have depicted the stereotypical attitude of the westerners towards Muslims. Among these works, Mohsen Hamid, Laila Halaby and Diana Abu-Jaber. Their awareness of the vulnerability of their Arab community, especially post 9/11, which reinforced bigotry against this minority, was the motive to break silence and express how Arab Americans feel about their ethnicity after 9/11. In other words, their literary production tries to challenge the misconceptions and misrepresentations of this minority, which play an effective role in the marginalization of this minority. So, correcting these preconceptions about Arab community in mainstream culture is of paramount importance to these writers . They do that by introducing contrasting images of this minority inside the Unites States. They share some political concerns, but the way in which their characters are depicted are different to some

extent. Their literary texts are considered to be counter narratives to the dominant discourse which defined by Edward Said as "great deconstructive power" (Imperialism 274)).

In *Once in a promised land*, Halaby focuses on the perception of Arabs as terrorists in mainstream America after the World Trade Center attacks, which reinforced rejection, hatred and anti-Arab bias. In other words, Halaby focuses on the rise of Islam phobia in America after the terrorist events. The novel deals with the alleged idea of Arabs as terrorists as a focal point through the backlash of 9/11 attacks directly on the lives of Arab Americans. Her awareness of the hostility of Arabs, especially Muslims, makes her distance her protagonists from their religious background in order to achieve their assimilations in America, but racism overcomes all their attempts. It is necessary to mention that while Jassim and Salwa are Arab Muslims by denomination, they are not religious or they do not practice the Muslim prayer rituals and Salwa does not wear hijab, the head covering of Muslims ..The religiously neutral profile of the protagonists is chosen by the writer to indicate that no political commitment or perspective can trouble their process in joining the melting pot of the new land. Additionally, the American consumerist tendency of lifestyle makes them away from religious and cultural roots. In other words, they have been detached from their religious and cultural values in return for the promise of economic prosperity and well-being.

Because the religion of Islam religion has been falsely associated with terrorism, especially after these events, Arabs have become the object of blind discrimination and tight scrutiny. Halaby is aware of the vulnerability of Arabs' situation in America after the attacks, from the outset. She introduces her protagonist in the following excerpt:

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 Muslims. Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center

Nothing and everything (VII-VIII).

The danger that is always facing Arab Muslims, living in America is Islam phobia that is reflected in hatred or contempt of Islam. Islam phobia is closely related to orientalism which focuses on the western perceptions of the Middle East and the reasons of the split between them. These perceptions are based on the desire of the western authorities for political, economic and cultural dominance over the Middle East. Edward Said says that one of the principal dogmas of Orientalism is " the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior" (300).

This wrong depiction is highly motivated by the media. In *Once in a Promised land*, Halaby depicts the mounting anxiety of Islam phobia as a source of terrorism that increased in notoriety after 9/11. On the one hand, Salwa is always stressed by the Islam phobic atmosphere surrounding Arabs. Feeling of fear, horror and vulnerability helped in extending subject matter that aims at realizing and confronting the outsiders' threats. One day she is frightened to hear a radio announcer's message of prejudices and intolerance saying: "Is anyone fed up yet? Is anyone sick of nothing being done about all those Arab terrorists? In the name of

Jesus Christ! They live with us. Among us! Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us. They just want..." (56).

On the other hand, the protagonist Jassim is carefully censored by his colleagues because many Americans generally attributed the characteristics of terrorists to all Arabs. He is placed under surveillance without clear proof that he is connected to terrorism in some way. Thus, The writer focuses on the president George H.W. Bush's administration who used these events as justification for placing Arabs in America under tight scrutiny. In fact, the federal officials were permitted to monitor the individuals who come under suspicion. His administration's "war on terror" has become war on the religion of Islam when widespread racism and discrimination against them became perfectly justifiable.

. Through this investigation, Halaby shows the complexities around religious and discriminatory profiling against Arab and Muslim backgrounds. He is cruelly negated when is investigated by the FBI about his political and religious views because he becomes the target of suspicion on the basis of religious and ethnic affiliations. The following dialogue shows Jassim's interrogation by FBI agents about his political and religious beliefs.

"What was your reaction to the events of September 11"[ask the FBI agent]

For this reason he was prepared. " I was shocked, saddened, unsettled. Probably much the same as most people in this country. I was so unexpected."

Would your reaction have been different if it had been expected? Ask Agent Fletcher.

How often do you pray in a mosque?

I have not prayed in a mosque since I was a young man.

(OPL 231)

Being an Arab does not mean a security hazard. The above lines shows that it is mistakenly believed that going to a mosque is the cause of violence or the person who goes to a mosque is politicized because Islam is seen as a religion advocating the destruction of non-Muslims. In other words, the west associates Islam with terrorist activities and the shouting of "Allah" with awful actions. This belief is based on the mistaken perception of the Islamic fundamentalism. Jassim becomes the target of racist attitude because he is a Muslim rather than an Arab, although he does not adopt Islamic beliefs or practices as a way of life or involved in any political activity.

Jassim experiences another racist attitude which distresses him greatly and his relationship with America goes toward a dead point. His situation gets more complicated or worse when he accidentally hits an American boy called Evan parker on a skateboard on his way back from his swimming pool routine. In fact, the boy is the responsible for making Jassim hit him. "[T]he boy had clearly had a death wish"(OPL130). However, Jassim was cleared by the witnesses on the spot.

Filled with a pang of remorse for this regrettable accident, Jassim decides to visit Mrs. Mary Parker, the bereaved mother, to apologize. On arriving there, Jassim is surprised to know that Evan is uncompromising hater of Arabs. His strong anti-Arab feelings are revealed through the sticker of his skateboard that reads "Terrorist Hunting License" (OpL76). When she hears that her son's killer is an Arab, she surprises because it

was her son's wish to kill an Arab. The mother of the murder victim tells Jassim:

See, when 9/11 happened, Evan was freaked out, totally freaked out ...ranted and raved about how Arabic people should all be kicked out of this country, rounded up, herded up, and thrown out. I ignored it for a while, thought he was just scared. We were all scared those people were going to blow us all up. Then he started talking about how he wished he could kill an Arab-my own son talking about killing someone! I sat him down and told him two wrongs don't make a right, that most Arabic people don't have anything to do with this. He wouldn't listen-refused to. Talked like a bigot, and I was so mad at him (200-201).

Salwa's disillusion are very deep that this accident makes her feel anxiety about the negative stereotypes of Arabs in mainstream culture. This event makes her realize that there is a major obstacle which does not allow her to be accepted in the American society on the basis of her ethnicity or how religion plays a dynamic role in American society. Salwa sees that there is a big difference between her homeland and host land when she says:

Do you see, Jassim? if we had been home and you had hit that boy, his family would have gotten involved from the beginning. Here, no one cared until they found out who you were, and now they've made it grounds for a federal investigation.

It's crazy-they 're not looking at who you are as a person, at all the great work you 've done. They 're looking at the fact that you're an Arab. Do you think any American would be scrutinized in this way?.(301)

Image of Arab woman is an important point in this novel. Arab women were labeled as weak, mute, and passive. Halaby challenges and resists the image of women as either exotic or oppressed as well In Halaby's *Once in a promised land*, the protagonist Salwa is depicted as a strong woman who knows her duties and needs. She is always fighting to protect her husband Jassim from American racist attitudes. For instance, in an innocuous shopping mall, when Jassim is suspected as a security threat and confronted by the mall-assistant, it is his wife Salwa who defends him. In a defiant gesture, Salwa wants to know why Jassim has been looked upon with suspicion. According to this situation, she becomes very protective of her husband. Instead of receiving protection from her husband Jassim, he is taken into her protective custody. Salwa's reaction is worth noting in the following excerpt:

Iam sorry to hear that. Are you planning to have every Arab arrested now?...Do you not use your brain? 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 talk about in school. You can say you saw a real live Arab and had to call security on him.(*OPL30*)

Although Salwa's strong personality and successful education, Jake, the white American man could profile her as a sexual object as a result of the widespread orientalist and sexist representations of Arab women in the

American media. In fact, Salwa's growing alienation makes her slip into a sexual relationship with Jake, a manipulative employee at the bank where she works. Although her relationship with him is short, it is calamitous. When she decides to visit Jake's flat to say goodbye, he attacks her injuring her seriously. Being an American man, he stubbornly refuses to be left by a supposedly submissive and docile Arab female. Through this visit Salwa discovers Jake's low opinion of her as an Arab woman. For him, she is humiliated, disgraced, and treated as a beast. In short, she is an Arab with all stereotypes that goes with. He uses racist discourse or insulting words to belittle her saying:

Why did you come here? You came because you want sex. That's why. That's all of this has been about...No, Jake. I am saying goodbye..."when do you leave?" "Monday..." "So you're running back to the pigsty you came from. A part of her brain processed that he was giving her a gift, a picture, and that for some reason he was lofting it into the air. In one powerful blink, it came down on her checks, just below her eyes, and she felt as if her face had been sliced with something that was part sledgehammer, part knife. She screamed and bent her head forward, cover her face caught her blood...Another blow, aimed at the back of her head..."Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch!.(322)

Through Salwa's relation with Jake, Halaby sheds light on the profusion of western perceptions of the Middle East that Arab women are animals easily led. In other words, Jake's words reveal that he holds stereotyped images of Salwa and her homeland and how this stereotype of the Arab world is rooted in the western mind as an exotic whore raising in uncivilized and lowbrow environment. In fact, Salwa is negatively

affected by her relationship with Jake because she accepts submissively to play a subordinate role to adopt another culture.

Co-existence with the Other is another important point in the novel. Coexistence in Halaby's *Once is a Promised Land* between Arab and Americans seems to be irreconcilable due to the consequent increasing hostility and anti-Arab bias after 9/11. The novel is characterized by the increasing anti-Arab sentiments because the novel deals explicitly with the confused political landscape of the 9/11 attacks. As a result, Halaby shows the Americans' public support for domestic scrutiny policies that focused on Arabs and Muslims as terrorists.

Halaby depicts the antagonistic and vilifying attitudes of the west to Arabs, especially Muslims. In her novel, the American characters have less difficulty with breaking religious and racial boundaries. Through her characters, Halaby evokes the political discourse by the president Bush a week after the terrorist attacks, especially the very known statement, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists". Here Halaby presents two examples which are considered the product of blind hatred and media; Jack Frank the ex-marine who one day interrupts Jassim's peace at the Fitness Bar because he eyes him suspiciously and reports all his movements to the FBI to get revenge. He is aroused and motivated by his patriotic feelings to do so.

There are some scary times we live in ...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).

Another example penny, a waitress whom Jassim has an affair, says her opinion about Arab terrorists who deserve to be bombed but Jassim is an exception. According to Penny, Jassim is not classified among the supposed enemies of the American nation. Penny's beliefs are shaped by what is widely reported in the national media. She is highly influenced by popular misconceptions about Arabs and images transmitted on TV. The distorted image of Arabs and the false stereotypes of Muslims are widely reported in the western media by all possible ways. Her discussion with her flat mate about what the government should do with Arabs reflects the general perception of the Americans towards Arabs. It the dialogue between them.

I don't get you, penny. How can you like that guy and then want to blow up his whole country? Penny continued staring at the television. "The one has nothing to do with the other. And he's from Jordan, not Afghanistan. Jassim is a good guy-he is not like them, shouldn't be judged like them. But those people over there, they oppress women and kill each other. They're the ones who should be bombed...Men over there can marry four women at once, make them wear those sheets over their whole bodies.(281)

In this vein, Halaby sheds light on misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the Arab culture on the basis of the prevalent inherited and distorted images in popular media that reflect Arab's backwardness, oppression, terrorism, fanaticism and the duality of harem

that are constructed in the American mind and culture. In other words, the novel pays the reader's attention's to the existence of such misrepresentations, but it shows how reality differentiates from these stereotypes through the depiction of the protagonists Salwa and Jassim .

It is important to mention that the September 11 terrorist attacks have inaugurated an interest in Islam and Muslims among American feminists who play the role of the champions of Muslims women's rights or who feel it is their duty to defend Muslim women against their marginalization in Islamic societies.. It is mistakenly believed that there is a close link between Islam and oppression of women or Harem that indicates the women turn into a victim of patriarchal Islamic society.

To sum up, The World Trade Center attacks are considered to be a transformative event in the history of Arabs in America that increased hatred and anti-Arab bias. Halaby's *Once in a promised land* shows fear of the increasing resentment and racial discrimination against Arab Americans and challenge the western misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims by providing contrastive images. The representations had been deep-rooted in the western minds. As immigrants from Arab countries, they are in in a vulnerable position; they suffer from stereotyping, injustice, and racial discrimination especially after 9/11 attacks. Halaby has published her work after 9/11 attacks which highlights the difficulties and risks of the very fact of being an Arab in the united states after 9/11. The text is regarded as bridges between the Arab world and the west. The writer reflects or provide deeper understanding of the Arab community and its culture on both a local and global level.

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