

## Post 11 /9 Trauma and the Demise of the American Dream in the Anglo-Arab novel *Once in a Promised Land* by Laila Halaby

Wasan Ali Hasan

Department of English, College of Education for Women, Al-Iraqia University Baghdad,  
Iraq

Email: wasan.hasan@aliraqia.edu.iq

### ABSTRACT

People see America as a place where they can rise from poverty and improve themselves. An environment where financial security is the result of education and hard effort. A location that offers opportunity, freedom, and hope. They see it as a happy and welcoming ambiance. A position in which the person has some control over his living situation in life. This is how people see the American dream. This study examines Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, an Anglo-Arab fiction. The current study examines how the 11-9 attacks negatively impacted Arab Americans and destroyed their American dream. This paper also emphasizes how difficult it is for Arab Americans to retain their identity and fit into American society after the attacks.

**Keywords:** the American dream, the 11-9 attacks, racism, terrorism, Arab identity, and American identity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

People regard America as a place where they can get out of poverty and ameliorate themselves as well as their conditions. A place where financial stability is earned through education and hard work. A locale that provides opportunity, liberty, and optimism. They perceive it as a carefree, fortuitous, and friendly environment. They see America as a place in which the individual has some influence over his living situation. This is how people interpret the American dream. Nevertheless, the 11/9 attacks demolished this hope for Arab Americans.

Even after 22 years have passed since the Twin Tower terrorist attacks, many Americans still consider it to be one of the most tragic events in American history. The horrific events of 11/9 have directly affected Arab Americans as well as everyone who has an Arab name or appearance. As a result, Arab society has gone from being an unseen group to one that is conspicuous. Undoubtedly, the terrorist assaults made Arabs in the United States more visible to the public, exposed them to discrimination, and racism, and even compelled them to choose between their Arab and American identities.

According to Maha El Said (2003), the idea that there exist "border regions" for interaction in a postmodern world was dissipating and changing the American scene. In its never-ending fight against terrorism, jingoism increased and free speech came under strict restriction. The media did this by portraying terrorists as different from other people and by opposing them. Not only were the buildings demolished in the attack on the WTC, but one of the fundamental civil liberties enjoyed by Arab Americans was also taken away. However, Arab Americans continue to prosper and have a voice.

Even though Arab Anglophone literature has been around for more than a century, the awful events of September 11, 2001, are what helped it become more widely known. Since then, the number of publications by Anglophone Arab authors has dramatically increased (Al Ghaberi, 2018). L. S. Majaj (2008) states that this literary renaissance is a reflection of the Arab-American community's rising inventiveness as well as the evolving historical, social, and political conditions that have elevated Arab-Americans to the forefront and given them new platforms for expression.

Because of how 11 / 9 has altered the meaning of the Arab identity, Arab-American writers feel compelled to defend and depict how the attacks have affected them. To illustrate how this experience forces Arab-American personalities to live in detachment from their homeland and host country and battle to keep their identity,

several literary works by Arab-American authors have been released. *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) by L. Halaby is one of the Arab-American authors who have addressed the effects of the 11/9 terrorist attacks. In Halaby's work, the difficulties of sustaining and maintaining their place in society are contrasted with the American stereotype of Arabs that is prevalent, especially in light of the tragic events of 11/9.

## 2. Laila Halaby

In 1966, Jordanian and American parents gave birth to Laila Halaby in Lebanon. Halaby spent most of her childhood in Arizona, where she first experienced the tug of two opposing cultures before ultimately finding comfort there. According to Halaby, she has never felt like an Arab-American because her mother was born and grown in the United States and her father has always lived in Jordan. She identifies as both Arab and American, yet she does not understand the hyphen. Even though, she feels like the hyphen, where she lives. (American Writers Museum).

She is the author of two well-known novels, *West of the Jordan* (2003) and *Once in a Promised Land* (2006), both of which have earned PEN Beyond Margins Awards and were selected among the top 100 works of fiction by the Washington Post in 2007. She is also the author of two poetry collections ( Laila Halaby website).

## 3. *Once in a Promised Land*

*Once in a Promised Land* is a post-11/9 book that gained popularity for addressing the incident, which was crucial in the transformation that took place in the world (Mashree, 2017). It is the second book by Laila Halaby. Like many other Arab-American authors, Halaby felt compelled to speak up in defense of and define the Arab-American area. Due to this, she decided to mention the struggles of Arab Americans in her book, whose main characters fought against prejudice, racism, and the unfavorable stereotype that American society has held about Arab Americans ever since the 11/9 terrorist attacks. (Mouna, 2016).

The novel tells the tale of a Jordanian couple Jassim and Salwa, who have immigrated to Arizona in the American southwest in search of the American dream. Halaby refers to them in the preface of her novel saying:

The story happens in the provincial American town of Tucson, Arizona, a town with weather and possibilities (and very little water). Our key characters are Salwa and Jassim. We only learn them after the World Trade Center buildings have been devastated by jets flown by Arabs and Muslims. Both Salwa and Jassim are Arabs.

Both are Muslims. They had nothing to do with what took place at the World Trade Center, of course. Anything and nothing. (Halaby, 7-8)

Jordanian hydrologist Jassim believes that clean water is to everyone's benefit since "Water is the source of life, and technology is the source of power" (Halaby, 245). From his childhood, Jassim realizes how valuable water is especially after discovering an extensive reservoir beneath his uncle's estate. From that time, he penetrates that "Water is what will decide things, not just for us but for every citizen of the world as well" (Halaby, p. 41). Jassim relocates to Arizona, in the United States' southwestern region, to further his academic study in Water Resource Management and obtained a Ph.D. in 'Rainwater Harvesting' after graduating with a B.S. in Civil Engineering from the University of Jordan in Amman. He joins a company that specializes in water systems in various regions of Tucson before coming back home to seek a rewarding career chance and getting married to Salwa.

Salwa works as a real estate broker and banker. She is a Jordanian Palestinian who was born in the United States. "Salwa is Palestinian by birth, Jordanian by domicile, and American by the membership." (Halaby, 70) Due to her fascination with silky pajamas, her family has given her the title Queen of Pajamas.

Before meeting Dr. Jassim Haddad, an American hydrologist who had come to her institution to give a speech about the value of water, she became engaged with her neighbor and her faculty acquaintance Hassan. She was even legally allowed to marry him. Jassim proposed to her and she agreed because she saw in him a man who would lead her to her long-desired land. Jassim felt a specific type of connection to her because he recognized home in her, making her both more valued and a cause of hatred. Her lover Hassan was devastated, so she quickly accepted the marriage proposal and moved to Arizona. She was able to secure a job there as a banker. After their marriage, Jassim and Salwa were affluent immigrants with a mansion on the slopes and an expensive car; they had accomplished their 'American Dream'.

#### **4. Before and After the Destruction of the Dream**

Halaby divides her work into two sections, one before 11/9 and one after. Her goal is to investigate the two contrasting situations in which Arab Americans live. The first section of the book describes Salwa and Jassim's lifestyle before 11/9; they had American-style lives of luxury, acting as though they were natives of the country and engaging in both business and leisure regularly. It is seen in their home and other

belongings. They live a wealthy and secure life, as evidenced by their home in a peaceful and lovely neighborhood, their "glinty Mercedes," and their "leather shoes." (Halaby, 22-23). This demonstrates how Salwa and Jassim have integrated into American society, found lucrative employment, and adopted American culture. A seemingly perfect depiction of family life emphasizes consistency and safety, which are a result of Jassim's standing in the American way of life before 11/9.

Salwa and Jassim see America as a place where they can better themselves, a place where good education and perseverance will lead to financial security. A place where there is a chance, freedom, and optimism. They perceive it as a joyful and friendly place. They regard America as a country where a person can have some influence over their life chances. "It was something Jassim appreciated in Americans, something he had tried to instill in himself: they didn't let social constraints get in the way of the day plan" (Halaby, 8).

Their "foolish" aspirations of the "promised land" are utterly destroyed after the 11/9 attacks. Halaby removes any hopes her two characters might have had of seeking a safe environment where they could stay peacefully. Halaby emphasizes the fact that Arab Americans have lagged behind other social outcasts since September 11, being labeled not only as subpar citizens but also as social risks. A bank customer who claims to be "a native Tucsonan, American born and raised," aggressively abuses Salwa because she needs to speak with someone about her bank account who "understands better" (Halaby, 114). Salwa gives her the choice of their Chinese director, a Mexican male, or a lesbian from the United States. The attacks undoubtedly had a serious influence on the couple's existence. Since their look inspires suspicion, a buddy of Salwa lends them both American flags to display to any American who is genuinely disturbed by the terrorist attacks to conduct an act of retaliation. "You should place one on the back window of your car. You never realize what others are feeling, and having this will let them know where you stand." (Halaby, 55).

Furthermore, when the married couple goes shopping immediately following the terrorist strikes, Amber, a mall sales associate, follows Jassim and summons a security guard. Salwa addresses Amber in a hurry, asking, "Excuse me, young lady, but why did you summon that security guard to my husband?" (Halaby, 29). "He terrified me because he simply stayed there staring for a long time as if he was high or something. And suddenly I recalled everything that had been going on" says Amber in response (Halaby, 30). Amber defends her actions when Mandy, her manager, asks

why she phoned security: "You told us to notify anything strange, and I just thought he looked weird." (Halaby, 31).

Another image: The FBI starts investigating Jassim after he accidentally kills an American boy because they think he might be a terrorist. Jassim finds it impossible to believe that such behavior would exist in the nation where he has lived for such a long time: "Things like this aren't supposed to happen in America. Americans are pure, simple people, their culture governed by a few basic tenets, not complicated conspiracy theories" (Halaby, 299). Jassim lost his ability to talk well following the accident and switched back to his native tongue. "He immediately found it impossible to get through, waiting for the end of each remark and interpreting it again to verify he had stated what he had intended for all the years his tongue had used English to speak." (Halaby, 120).

Jassim and Salwa have to endure different types of assault and abuse because of their Arabic identity. They suffer from people's bad treatment and their insulting accusations. Jassim gets mistreated by an American guy who yells at him to go home while having lunch with his boss, Marcus. As a result of psychological pressures and a sense of isolation from society, Jassim found that the only outlet to escape from reality was to change his lifestyle. Instead of going to the fitness center as usual, he starts to spend his time in Denny's café where he met a waitress named Penny. He is attracted to her physically. With this relationship, Jssim feels distanced from his wife Salwa who has not attempted to understand him.

As a result of the social upheaval in her community, her divorce from her husband, and the loss of a child, Salwa, on the other hand, feels an emptiness around her that she attempts to fill in some manner. She gets acquainted with her husband's colleague named Jake who is younger than her. Jake is a drug user and supplier. He shows interest in joining Arabic classes to learn the language and know about the Islamic culture and traditions which become the focus attention of the Westerns, especially after the September 11 attacks. Jake is interested only in having a sexual relationship with Salwa since she is a "gorgeous Arab," older, and "foreign." Salwa is impacted by his advancements and would feel better in his company since it keeps her away from the stress of the outer world and married life, despite his original intentions.

Following the September 11, 2001 events, FBI agents begin to interview thousands of Arabs who are lawfully living there while still students or workers. These interviews take place in mosques, educational institutions, and homes. They ask people about "their political and religious views if they supported the 9/11 terrorists, whether they had had any training in science or using weapons, and where they had previously

traveled.” (Halaby, 225). Jassim receives word that a few of his workplace mates had complained about him. suspecting him to be a terrorist. This leads the FBI to conduct an investigation.

During the investigation, Jassim is questioned about the accident accusing him of killing the boy on purpose because of racism since he is anti-Islamic. He is also charged with poisoning the city's water supply. He answers them loudly,

I work as a scientist. I try to ensure that water is safe and readily available. I am an ordinary citizen who happens to be Arab. I have access to the city's water supply, but I have no intention of abusing it. The fact that I am an Arab should not raise suspicions... You want to think that I am capable of evil simply because I am Arab and was reared as a Muslim. Before throwing such a wide net, it is sometimes best to look within. (Halaby, 232)

Apart from that, Jassim is interrogated about his wife's opinions concerning the September 11<sup>th</sup> strikes, her workmates, and her current changes in behavior. He is astonished to know that Salwa has wired a fourteen thousand-dollar lump sum to her house in Jordan the day after the incident. During the conversation, he also learns that Salwa's phone has been hacked and that FBI agents are always watching her. Later on, Jassim gets fired from the company after spending fifteen years of work and he loses all his belongings. He feels disappointed because his wife lets him down refusing to support him, especially with her decision to leave America and have a homeward journey. On the other hand, Salwa goes to Jake's house to say goodbye. She realizes Jake has been using drugs when she notices him in an abnormal state. She rushes out of his room and is smacked in the face by a picture she had always admired. The photograph is about a Japanese myth that tells the story of “a young lady who sought happiness yet, every time she believes she has, it eludes her” (Halaby, 209). In her pursuit of satisfaction, the woman lost her attractiveness, which is one of the most important factors in her happiness. Yet, she did not realize this truth until she had lost it. Salwa's situation is similar to this woman's. She seeks happiness but in vain.

The couple realizes that life in the U.S.A. has become challenging and perhaps their souls are endangered due to how Americans treat Arab Americans. The main characters (Jassim and Salwa) have lived in America for a very long time and are fluent in English. However, following the attacks, they had trouble using English. Additionally, he thinks the police officers don't comprehend him. Like many American talks, the narrator claims that his words did not accurately reflect his

intentions. He struggled to determine if it was his English or the fact that people did not pay attention and only expressed what they were expecting to hear.

## Conclusion

The novel discusses how the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, changed what it means to be Arab in America. Salwa and Jassim, a married Jordanian couple, who fled their nation in quest of the American dream, are the subject of the book. Since the terrible events of 11/9, the characters of Halaby's novel have experienced a change in their way of life and are now forced to deal with prejudice, racism, and unfavorable preconceptions in American culture. This event thus enhances the impression that one is caught between two societies, as well as the sense of displacement and isolation from both one's own country and that of one's host.

Two key elements should be emphasized in discussing and understanding the story. First of all, the book affirms that the 11/9 attacks were the pivotal moment in the protagonist's pursuit of the American dream. After the attacks, Arab Americans become the focus of Western attention, and Jassim and Salwa share this fate as they struggle with American issues despite being there for a long period. The second issue Halaby makes is that the 11/9 terrorist acts have further strengthened the negative stereotypes about Arabs.

## References

1. Al Ghaberi, J.( 2018). Arab Anglophone Fiction: A New Voice in Post-9/11 America. *Contemporary Literary Review India*.5(3)
2. American Writers Museum. 2020. Accessed 5 Dec. <https://americanwritersmuseum.org/my-america-laila-halaby/>.
3. Halaby, L. (2007). *Once in a Promise Land*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
4. Laila Halaby.2022. Accessed 5 Dec. <https://lailahalaby.net/about/>
5. Mouna, M. 2016. Arab-American Identity Doubleness in Post 9/11 America Case of Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*[Master thesis, UNIVERSITY OF MAI 1945. GUELMA] <https://dspace.univguelma.dz/jspui/bitstream/123456789/939/1/M821.056.pdf>
6. Mashree, A. (2017). The Representation of Arabs and Muslims in L. Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355193837\\_The\\_Representation\\_of\\_Arabs\\_and\\_Muslims\\_in\\_Laila\\_Halaby%27s\\_Once\\_in\\_a\\_Promised\\_Land](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355193837_The_Representation_of_Arabs_and_Muslims_in_Laila_Halaby%27s_Once_in_a_Promised_Land)

7. Majaj, L.S. Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments. American Studies Journal 52, n. p. Retrieved Dec. 27, 2022, <http://www.asjournal.org/archive/52/150.html>.
8. Said, M. E. (2003). The Face of the Enemy: Arab-American Writing Post-9/11. ANALYSIS IN THE HUMANITIES-INDIANA.