

# The Representation of Arabs and Muslims in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*.

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## INTRODUCTION

In her *Once in a promised Land*, Laila Halaby presents the vision of the Americans towards Islam and Muslims. The picture is drawn with fear, horror and above all pity. *Once in a Promised Land* is a post 9/11 novel that has its popularity because of tackling the event that played a very important role of the change that happened in the world. The novel presents a Jordanian couple who live in America as American citizens. They undergo certain changes after 9/11 for nothing but for their being Muslims and Arabs. This paper will tackle the representation of Islam and Muslims in Laila Halaby's *once in a Promised Land*.

Arab American literature has been subjugated and given less importance. The reason behind this can have different phases; first is that Arab-American literature had been usually confined to the issues of Arabs in the Middle East or the problems of Arabs in America; not like African-American literature linking their issues to the American society, and this might be why it has not got any attention in the academic American circle. The other phase is viewed by some scholars to be related to Arabs themselves who did not contribute to the cultural American Academic circle. Before the 9/11 attacks, Arab-American literature remained "less understood". Therefore, 9/11 attacks drew much attention to Arab-Americans as citizens and writers. Carol Fadda-Conrey in her paper entitled "Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu-Jaber's "Crescent" "illustrates by citing the feminist Joanna Kadi who describes Arab-American authors as "...the most invisible of the invisibles" (qtd in Fadda-Conrey 1). Moreover, Mervat Hatem links this absence of the Arab-American literature as to be shaped by political reasons. Thus, this background illustrates the case of Arabs and Muslims as writers in the United States.

The history of Arab Americans goes back to the nineteenth century when the first wave of Arabs migrated to the United States of America. It was during 1870s when different groups from places like Syria, Lebanon and Jordan migrated for economic reasons. This group of immigrants was mostly Arab-Christians who wanted to have better life than that they had at the time of the Ottoman Empire which was ruling by the time. The second group of the Arab immigrants, as Jenhan Ghazal Read notes, came to be after the Second World War because of the political instability in their areas. Most of the immigrants of this group were Muslims. After the 1970s till the present day comes the third groups of immigrants which is mostly happening with individual immigrants who come to the United States hoping for mirages of a better life. The second and third groups are usually shown to be as one wave of immigrants, based on Read's note, who have come from various Arab countries including Yemen, Iraq, and the Gulf Countries. The reason of immigration related to the second and third groups is unconfined; there are various reasons to count.

When we talk of Arab Americans, we refer to Arabs generally from different religions and sects; mostly Muslims are Sunnis, Shias, Ismailis ...etc. Christians, Jewish, Bahais and other different religions. The picture drawn against them is viewed because of the terror attacks of 9/11. They all were included under that picture of terror.

Prior to September 11, these immigrants had lived mostly in a better situation than that after 9/11. After September 11, these immigrants have witnessed a great change in the way of being treated by the American society. They have undergone lots of upheavals that even lead some critics like Jonathan K. Stubbs to question whether Arab Americans are the New American Niggers? This illustrates the picture of Muslims in the United States post 9/11 how the way looking at them has undergone a great change. The reason behind this is the label of terrorism associated to Muslims. It is; therefore, Muslims were ill-treated and suffered because of the picture drawn on them.

However, the 9/11 catastrophe brought traumatic change in the life of Arab Americans and Muslims, it helped to draw attention to some skillful authors as Slaita in her book, *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics*, lists them out with their works:

Recently, though, some excellent Arab American fiction has been published and warrants attention. This fiction includes Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa's edited collection *Dinarzad's Children* (2004), Patricia Sarrafian Ward's *The Bullet Collection* (2003), Miriam Cooke's *Hayati* (2000), Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* (2003), and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003), Rabih Alameddine's *I, The Divine* (1999) and *KOOLAIDS: The Art of War* (1998), Kathryn K. Abdul-Baki's *Ghost Songs* (2000), Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), and Samia Serageldin's *The Cairo House* (2000), with much more by these and emerging authors certain to follow.(13)

This shows how there appeared a big number of Arab American writers writing in different forms. This paper will shed light on the representation of Islam and Muslims in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*. The narrative of L. Halaby illustrates the life of Arab Americans from different phases. The paper will highlight two views; first the picture of Muslims in the American Mindset, second the presentation of Islam itself among Muslim Arab Americans.

The Representation of Islam and Muslims in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*.

L. Halaby presents her novel in a mixture of both Arabic and American narration. She divides the novel into four parts with *Before* and *After* parts, i.e., can be considered six parts. She introduces her characters, a Jordanian couple, Salwa and Jassim in the *Before* part.

Our story takes place in the provincial American town of Tucson, Arizona, a locale with weather and potential (and very little water).

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)

Thus, the novel starts, it presents the two characters as they live in Tucson in Arizona, and it sheds light on them after the Trade World Center buildings attacks. Muslim Arab terrorists are accused to have committed such a crime. Salwa and Jassim had nothing to do with that, yet they come painfully across the consequences of what happened. Being Arabs and Muslims was a *de facto* reason to let this couple get involved with the event. The quote clearly pictures how Salwa and Jassim have nothing to do with the attacks, yet they are involved as if they are doing everything in the attacks. They are victims in the way they are treated by their fellow Americans since they are looked at as danger on them. What Halaby shows here foreshadows what goes on later in the novel. This introduction painfully brings

the scene of terror to be associated with the Jordanian couple. There is nothing shown on them as to be linked to what happened, but their main fault is being Arabs and above all Muslims. Thus, one clearly hints at the representation of Muslims in the scene of terror in the novel.

The first part of the novel portrays how Salwa and Jassim lived prior 9/11; they had an American luxurious life, living like Americans themselves, following up a daily routine full of work and enjoyment. After the attacks, Salwa and Jassim, as any other Arab American, have undergone a great change in their life. It started with the War on Terror Speech of George Bush, the President of the U.S. at the time. When the American citizens started to question anything looks strange, so was the case of Arab Americans to them; they looked strange, and therefore suspicious. This in itself is a kind of portrayal to the picture of Muslim Arab Americans, they are strange to them since they suspect them with terror. The 9/11 attacks labeled a kind of stigma on Arabs, so the representation of theirs has become horrible in the American scenario.

However, it was very shocking to Salwa and Jassim having known about the attacks; they felt bad for what happened, those around them could not realize it. It is noticed when Joan, Salwa's coworker, gives Salwa an American flag decal, and she tells Salwa: "You should put one on your car, on the back window. You never know what people are thinking, and having this will let them know where you stand" (55). This illustrates the American vision towards Salwa, since she is advised to re-represent herself as an American indicating that through the flag decals. This brought fear to Salwa, as she thought if this will bring any "repercussion towards Arabs". She discussed that with Randa, a Lebanese friend of Salwa. Halaby skillfully illustrates this fear and portends the upcoming change for Arabs as follows:

Salwa had talked to her friend Randa several times as well, babbling about how horrible it was and how she feared for the repercussion toward Arabs in this country.

"Randa is worried about her kids, thinks someone might try to hurt them," she told him later.

"Why would anyone hurt Randa's kids? People are not so ignorant as to take revenge on a Lebanese family for the act of a few extremist Saudis who destroyed those buildings." He had promptly been proved wrong when a Sikh gas station attendant in Phoenix was killed *in retaliation*.

Salwa's outrage and sadness was immense. "What does a Sikh have to do with anything? People are stupid. *Stupid and macho*," she finished in English. (21)

Thus was the foreshadowing for what is going to happen to Arab Americans. Drawing what happened to Arabs in that way emphasizes the American vision clearly towards what came to be seen as Islamic terror. Here, the empathetic scene on Arabs and Muslims since they are the victims of what happened. This illustrates the picture of Arabs in the eyes of Americans.

Moreover, The scene continues with the change in the way Jassim and Salwa are treated when Salwa and Jassim were shopping. All of a sudden, Jassim was followed by a security as he looked suspicious. Salwa did not tolerate what happened, and she spoke out asking why the clerk sent the security over her husband. This made the picture clear as how Americans started to look at Arabs. Thus was the view:

“He just scared me.” Salwa saw that her eyes were enormous.  
 “He just stood there and stared for a really long time, like he was high or something. And then I remembered all the stuff that’s been going on.” Here the girl stopped and looked at her as though she were checking to make sure her reference was understood.  
 The words slid into Salwa’s understanding, narrowing and sharpening her anger. “I see. You thought he might want to blow up the mall in his Ferragamo shoes. Where is your manager?”  
 “She’s in the back,” Broomstick answered in a mouse squeak that forced Salwa a step closer under the thundering music.(30)

Amber , the clerk who called the security, simply answers that she got scared as she saw Jassim standing and staring for long time. As she saw him she remembered the attacks. It seemed to her as any Arab has become suspicious. It comes clearer when the reader comes to know that her uncle "died in the town towers"(30). This vision of horror within Amber represents a view of the American vision towards Arabs and Americans, to her being an Arab Muslim brings suspicion on Jassim. Furthermore, Salwa expected that something as such could have happened to Amber, yet she states:

“I am sorry to hear that. Are you planning to have every Arab arrested now?” She paused for just a second. “Do you not use your brains? This country has more than fifty million people in it, and you’re worried about your tacky little store. But now you’ll have a lot to talk about in school. You can say you saw a real live Arab and had to call security on him.”(30)

Hereafter, the struggle for having better life condition gets obstacles. The way Americans started to look at them as Muslims who have got cultural connection to the terrorists who have attacked the Two Trade World Towers. The story of the Jordanian couple here gets a new phase of conflict drawn by the picture of horror stuck with them after 9/11. Though Salwa was already in America, behaving like Americans, buying "smaller and sexier pajamas", she kept searching for the "Promised Land" in which she has been looked at as an outsider who has a vision of terror as a Muslim. She feels that they have not got the better life for which she aimed at, once she married Jassim, and left Hassan, Salwa's former lover. Halaby, here, skillfully takes the reader to a flashback with the nostalgia of her characters till she leads her readers to the time when Salwa tells Jassim of her pregnancy and miscarriage. Here, the story turns its page to the real suffering of this couple. It was after Jassim knows about Salwa's miscarriage, he hits the boy, Evan. This incident results a kind of disorder to Jassim's psychology. Jassim becomes haunted with the thought how it happened that the boy got killed by hitting him. He struggles a lot to tell his wife about the death of Evan, yet he could not tell her. He passes hardships within himself. He even breaks his going to swimming, instead he uses to go to a café where he feels he wants to tell the waitress of the café, Penny, that he killed a boy. He befriends her, and he gets closer to her. Meanwhile his wife, Salwa, gets alienated from him, and gets closer to her coworker, Jake, with whom she had a love affair, though she is married to Jassim. All these events created a gap between the couple.

Jassim after telling Penny, she recommended him to go and meet Evan's mother, Mary Parker. After meeting her, he comes to know that Evan hated Arabs, and "he wished he could kill an Arab". The conversation changed between Jassim and Mary Parker, Evan's mother, reveals a lot of the way by which Americans looked at Arabs. The dialogue goes as:

"You're Arabic?"

"Yes, I am an Arab."

Silence. She continued staring into her coffee, rocking gently.

"God is one twisted motherfucker."

"Excuse me?"

She was laughing, almost guffawing. "I'm sorry, but that is so fucked up. See, when 9/11 happened, Evan was freaked out, totally freaked out. It was weird, because once he was a teenager, he didn't lose it very often. But he did then, 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. I think he got it from his dad, who is a racist prick. That's why I say that God is one fucked-up bastard, to have Evan

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die under the wheels of an Arabic person's car."(200-1)

This quote highlights a lot of points. It shows how even young boys think of Arabs as terrorists; therefore, he has to kill an Arab. He even wanted to send all Arabs out of this country. The way Mary Parker talked of her son's wishes implies a great hatred within Americans against Arabs. She claims that they "were all scared those people were going to blow us all up."(200-1). She herself think also of Arabs as they want to blow them all. It has become an obsession like among Americans to look at Arabs in such a way. This scene again brings up the vision of the Americans against Arabs. It brought out next to Amber's fear Evan's hatred. Evan represents the American young child who is not an adult yet while Amber's vision brings the vision of an adult against Muslims. The matter here is internalized with the horror of the Muslim terrorists according to them.

With the beginning of part four, the FBI people appear. The climax of Jassim's disorder reaches its peak. Jassim comes to his office to find a business card under which was printed Noelle James, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and a note written "in a blue ink, Would like to ask you some questions."(221). It has made Marcus, Jassim's Manager, worry about it; he asked Jassim to talk to him and asks him to find a lawyer for himself. Marcus defends Jassim in the beginning, yet later he suspects Jassim's weird behavior lately. The suspension brought to Jassim emphasizes that he is as a Muslim misrepresented. This picture is drawn out with fear and horror. It also brings a kind of pity over Jassim.

Jassim calls the FBI members and accepts to meet them. They ask him several questions, till she comes to the accident of Evan, he retells the story of the accident. The dialogue goes between them in a suspicious manner. This viewed the scene clearer, and it made the reader aware that Noelle James and Agent Fletcher, the FBI members, were investigating an accused guy. It did not seem as any kind of normal investigations, the FBI's have had gathered so much information about Jassim, his wife, and Evan and his views. It was like someone has reported against Jassim. Jassim wonders at the time of the investigations that he had done all what he should do as reporting the police, calling ambulance, having been investigated with the police about the accident. It was weird how they are bringing up the accident case into questions, yet there were three or four witnesses who spoke out the way Evan threw himself to the car. Jassim felt uneasy to that even though he met the boy's family, he did not know about the sticker which was in Evan's skateboard. It goes as:

For God's sake, this was about Evan! But he had done all the right things. He had called the police. They had investigated. There were witnesses. What were they trying to do with these questions?

"What was your reaction to the events of September 11?"

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

It was so unexpected."

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

"My reaction was what it was. One cannot predict how one will react."

"How often do you pray in a mosque?"

"I have not prayed in a mosque since I was a young man."(231)

The idea that the reader grasps while Jassim was being investigated is that the problem of Jassim is his being an "ARAB" and above all a Muslim, and this is said later by Jassim. It is noticed also when he was asked about September 11, for which he was prepared, he clarifies that it was shocking to him and made him sad and unsettled, yet Agent Fletcher asked "Would your reaction have been different if it had been expected?". How come a person who has nothing to do with a case would expect a case to happen unless he is a participant in the case itself. The question was such a tricky one that would reveal a lot of Jassim's character to the FBI members. Furthermore, asking Jassim about how often he goes to a mosque, makes it obviously attached to his being an Arab and a Muslim. All this contributes to the vision Americans have on Muslims. It clearly illustrates the picture of horror and terror on Arabs and Muslims.

One can see clearly when Jassim gives a sense of how his typical day goes; he states that it is "Not unlike the rest of America". Agent Fletcher smartly refers to Jassim's "access to the entire city's water supply with the means to tamper with it,"(332), to which the rest of America does not have that access of water as Jassim has. This reference by Agent Fletcher pictures Jassim as he carries danger on the city's water supply; it puts him under suspicion. To this, Jassim openly states:

"Means is one thing, motive is another. I am a scientist. I work to make water safe and available. I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab. Yes, I have access to the city's water supply, but I have no desire to abuse it. The mere fact that I am an Arab should not add suspicion to the matter." His stomach tightened. He knew he should keep quiet, but the words were bursting from his mouth. "I have spent my entire life trying to find ways to make water safe and accessible for everyone. Just because I am an Arab, because I was raised a Muslim, you want to believe that I am capable of doing evil. It is sometimes best to look within before casting such a broad net." The words got



ahead of him, and he was not sure what he had just said. This righteousness was more in the style of his wife. He had never been prone to outrage.(232)

This reveals how Jassim is being seen by the American FBI. This adds to the previous views of Amber and Evan since the first two represented social views against Muslims while the FBI's represented a more official view. This makes the representation of Muslims as to have the sense of terror and danger on the US. Jassim states that his being an Arab, and being raised as Muslim should not add suspicion to him. It is clearly pictured in the investigations that Arab are meant in this abnormal kind of investigations. This is all resulted after the attacks of 9/11 for which all Arabs seemed to have become under surveillance.

The four part goes in to unfold the situation to which Arabs have reached. L. Halaby shows that what has come to Jassim was not out of the blue; it was arranged since Bella, the receptionist in Marcus' company, has kept an eye on Jassim. Bella was a Christian right, from the right wing party, she has kept a notebook on Jassim. This representation of Jassim coming from Bella represents the Christian political American vision on Muslims, i.e., Jassim. Bella has a kind of suspicion on Jassim yet she could not have any evidence to catch him. She reported the FBI against him for several times. It is caused out of the vision she has on Arabs and Muslims. Marcus tells that to his wife, and he explains that it was because of Bella that Jassim is to be investigated by the FBI. This was when Marcus was discussing with his wife what happened to Jassim. Marcus defended Jassim a lot, yet when his wife asked; "Do you think he could do something?"... "I mean, do you think Jassim is capable of doing something bad to the water supply?" (236). She adds "'I guess what I'm saying is that you need to know in your heart that he is the man you believe him to be, incapable of being bought, swayed, or moved toward evildoing.'"(237); it brought him suspicion since he feels that :

Something had been different in Jassim lately, something Jassim was not talking to him about. It could be anything, he had told himself over and over. It could be medical, or something in his marriage. Anything. Anything could be bothering him. (But why didn't Jassim come to him with it? Weren't they friends?) Not for the first time, his wife had brought to the surface the very thing that was nagging at him, harvested that vague doubt that had been lodged way back in his brain, undercutting the faith he had in others. (237)

The way Marcus' wife spoke to him brought a kind of suspicion to him. He thought of the strange behavior of Jassim lately. By this time, Marcus has not known anything about the accident of Evan. It has brought things worst to Jassim since his closest friend will not

tolerate more of it later. As the story goes on the FBI investigates with the clients for whom Jassim works. This, to Marcus, is a kind of 'maligning' for the company, and it is caused by Bella; therefore, he decides to fire her. However, things do not stop with this; it goes on after the FBI investigates the clients they call Marcus asking they "no longer wanted Jassim working for them. This last phone call unsettled him more than the others had." (268). By this time, Marcus knew everything about sending the money on 12 September, hitting the boy, to death, who had hatred views against Arabs. What adds to this is that Marcus loses a contract because Jassim is the senior hydrologist of the company. For all of that and knowing that the FBI has come to question Jassim because of Bella, Marcus decides to fire her, yet that was not enough he fires seven employees in that time. It was strange that he does so in a very shorty time. Furthermore, Marcus calls Jassim to fire him for unclear reasons but it is shown as:

“Jassim, lately I have been under a lot of pressure, a lot of pressure. Things are different now.”

Jassim let him talk, even though Marcus was sure he must know what he was leading up to.

“Jassim, in the past you have done some of the best work I have seen; you have been a huge asset to this company. Things have changed in the past months, though. Your work is faltering.”

“Are you warning me, Marcus?”

Marcus felt sick to his stomach. “I’m letting you go. I have to. We have lost several contracts. Several. These contracts are our livelihood. No contracts, no business.”

“And why have we lost these contracts?”

“Because of you.”(296)

This portrays how Jassim has become a kind of obstacle to the firm business. He is not accepted to lead any kind of contracts, so the firm is losing business. Jassim's work after all these events has become less effective. It did not make any business to the firm rather the clients are asking Marcus not to make Jassim work for them. Here comes the vision of the status that Arabs have reached to in the U.S. after 9/11. Tis portrays the vision of the Americans on Muslims post 9/11.

Jassim leaves the firm as a fired scientist; when he tells his wife, she makes a striking statement that portrays the whole case to which Jassim reached in his work, she says; "They're looking at the fact that you're an Arab. Do you think any American would be scrutinized in this way?" (301). To this, one concludes that all the suspicion is clearly resulted for Jassim's being an Arab and above all a Muslim. By this progress of events, Salwa comes to Jassim with an e-ticket showing him that she is leaving the U.S. out of the blue since she herself has passed in difficulties and unwelcomed circumstances. It was mostly resulted by the gap she had with her husband, Jassim. Thus, one can discuss the representation of Islam and Muslims in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*.

## Conclusion

The representation of Muslims in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* can be viewed by referring to Maha El Said in her article, "The Face Of The Enemy: Arab-American Writing Post 9/11", she describes the situation of Arabs who are Muslims as they have been "othered". They are misrepresented as terrorist and people of horror. It was a shocking experience to them; they are pictured as the enemy who threatened their countries security. Similarly, it is seen with what happens to Jassim as he is suspected and looked at as if he carries danger on the city's water supply since he is a hydrologist. El Said puts it as:

"The predicament of 9/11 was not only an American national security plight, it brought about a personal dilemma to Arab-Americans. ... even though they themselves are Americans. Arab-Americans are confronted with the double burden of mourning their country's misery on one hand, and defending their Arabic heritage on the other. Although they are Americans by nationality, they still have the Middle Eastern features and roots that categorize them as the enemy."(1, El Said)

"The attack that brought down the World Trade Center, constructed a higher wall that separates "Self" from "Other". This division was enforced by the simplistic view expressed by the U.S. foreign policy, where the world is divided into "good" and "evil", 'with us' or 'against us'." (3, El Said)

It was like Arabs and Muslims needed to redefine themselves based on what the American foreign policy has declared in the speech of the American President G. Bush in his speech War on Terror; he states "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." This implied to the fellow Americans that things have to be defined and people should be aware of anything threatens their country. Since the attackers of Trade World Center were said to be Muslims, Arab Americans were looked at as they are on the side of the enemy. It lead to what we have noticed in the novel of Halaby. Halaby skillfully illustrates the situation of the Arab Americans who have become helpless. Jassim and Salwa needed to define themselves as they are not on the side of the terrorists; however, they have nothing to do with it. This reminds the reader of Halaby's statement in the *Before* part where she introduces her characters as :

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)

They are not part of the attack, but they are involved in the consequences of it. They suffer of the situation as an enemy suffers of his enemy. They are "othered" though they are Americans by nationality. Though they thought America is their Promised Land, they kept looking for the Promised Land and could not find it. Thus, one can discuss Laila Halaby's

*Once in a Promised Land* as a representation of Arabs and Muslims in the American society post 9/11.

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