

The Backlash of 9/11 Attacks on Arab Muslims in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*

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Abstract: *Since 9/11, 2001 Arab-American Muslims have never ceased to be under US national security focus and mainstream Americans bigotry. Such anti-Muslim backlash has been marked by higher degrees of surveillance, violence, detentions, hate crimes, discrimination and a number of murders. This surge in atrocities committed against Muslims is fueled by politics, media, and literary Islamophobic rhetoric. The aim of this paper is to analyze Laila Halaby's novel *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) and also examine how the protagonists, Jassim and Salwa, became direct victims and visible targets of suspicion, distrust, and downright racism due to the post-9/11 backlash. The novel highlights the tragic outcome of 9/11 attacks for the Arab Muslim community because of the increased patriotism and prejudice in the American society. The paper argues that, in the aftermath of 9/11 events, Arab-American Muslims have been falsely associated with terrorism and unjustly equated with the perpetrators of the attacks in the eyes of the mainstream Americans.*

Keywords: Arab Muslims, Laila Halaby, Racial Discrimination, 9/11 Backlash

Introduction

September 11, 2001 is regarded as a turning point in the history of the United States where a group of Al-Qaeda members carried out a series of terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers of World Trade Center, the great icons of American capitalism, and the Pentagon which resulted in the collapse of the Twin Towers and the death of nearly 3,000 lives. This horrible day has impacted Americans physically, mentally, and economically; whereas people from Islamic and Arab countries faced and continued to face hate crimes, racial discrimination, interrogation, detentions, and all sorts of backlash. Since then, the Western media in general and the American in particular have drastically intensified the already existing campaigns of demonizing Islam and its values, cultures, and followers. Due to the violent incidents of some minority fanatic Muslims, the entire Muslim community had to suffer various atrocities because they are viewed as potential terrorists or sympathetic to the perpetrators of the attack. Although the majority of Muslims in America through their organizations condemned the attacks and use of violence, they did not receive the media attention. However, they were under hate crimes and racial and religious profiling. Commenting on the Western biased attitudes in media coverage, Evelyn Alsultany states that Christians and Jews who commit violent actions like bombing abortion clinics or demolishing homes in Palestine and killing the families living there on behalf of the Israeli army are not portrayed in the Western media as representatives of people who adhere to Christianity and Judaism (p.312).

In the wake of 9/11, the US government led by president George W. Bush and the mass media adopted a discourse that inflames American public against Arab Muslims minority and, moreover, justifies their war on Afghanistan and Iraq. They portrayed Muslims as enemies within who are plotting more terror and, therefore, the responsibility of fighting them lies not only on the government but also on the patriotic Americans, as was stated on October 25, 2001 by attorney general John Ashcroft:

The federal government cannot fight this reign of terror alone. Every American must help us defend our nation against this enemy ... George W. Bush is fighting a war on terrorism. Under his leadership, we have pledged ourselves to victory ... Americans alive today and yet to be born and freedom-loving people everywhere will have new reason to hope because our enemies now have new reason to fear" (Ashcroft).

In response to such rhetoric, Muslims became legitimate targets of discriminatory actions, hate crimes, and vandalism as a form of collective punishment under the label of protecting national security. Such collective backlash touched the lives of Arabs and Muslims directly in public spheres, workplace, neighborhoods, etc. due to fear of Muslims and rejection of Islam as a faith. The US government, however, implemented some policies and passed legislations that targeted Muslims and confined their liberties. The most remarkable policies include the USA PATRIOT Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate

Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism) and the NSEERS (The National Security Entry-Exit Registration System) that were enacted in response to future threats of terrorism.

In literature as well, 9/11 gave a good opportunity to American authors to explore Islam and Arab Muslims in the US and use them as a subject matter to their literary works in order to satisfy their readers who are eager to know more about the identity of those who destroyed the Twin Towers and horrified America and the whole world. Definitely, their writings depicts Muslims in a derogatory and extreme manner; showing the tenets of Islam as a source of violence and Muslims as fanatic terrorists by nature. So, Arab-American writers felt the need to voice out their community's responses to the amplified sense of discrimination and social exclusion, and their writings focused mainly on issues that affected the Arab American community such as the backlash they suffered and the instability of their American identity within the broader multicultural society. Among such writings, Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* is a counter literary response to the dominant literary discourses that prevailed after 9/11.

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The Backlash of 9/11 in *Once in a Promised Land*

Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) traces the backlash of 9/11 attacks on a Muslim Arab-American couple during the heated Islamophobic atmosphere which followed that fateful day. The novel is about Jassim Haddad, a Jordanian hydrologist, and Salwa, a Palestinian banker and a real estate broker as a part-time job. Both are Americans by citizenship and they live and work in Tucson, Arizona. Like lots of immigrant dreamers, Jassim and Salwa travelled to America with aim of getting their American dream fulfilled by having well-paid jobs which provide them good wealth and also enable them to conform to the lavish American way of life. Being competent and passionate to their work brought them economic success and gained them material luxuries to the extent that Salwa's incessant purchases of silk nightwear has given her the nickname 'Queen of silk Pajamas', while Jassim could wear designer clothes and drive a \$ 50,000 Mercedes Sedan. As a non-practicing Muslims couple with all life comforts, they tend to assimilate into the American mainstream and join themselves in the melting pot of the Promised Land. Thus, they believe that their American dream has come true and have no intention to permanently get back to Jordan as "America, once tasted, is hard to spit out ... Jordan bumps through the blood, but America stays in the mouth" (64).

However, the terrorist attacks of September 11th put unexpected and accelerated end to the joyful life of Jassim and Salwa and drastically changed everything around them into misery. Since most of the perpetrators of that horrible event belonging to Arab nationalities, the whole Arab community came under scrutiny and they turned from invisible citizens into visible subjects. The couple immediately started to experience discrimination, humiliation, fear, and harassment from people around them. Their Arab Muslim decent increasingly rendered the subjects to suspicion, hostility and distrust, and they ultimately had no escape from facing bigotry, prejudice, and hatred resultant from the shockwave.

In the beginning, Jassim thought that 9/11 would never cause repercussion on their life since America is the land of equality, justice and freedom. He considered themselves as white Americans with quite important social positions and, therefore, did not expect any stupid act as revenge. When their family called from Jordan and expressed their concerns regarding the backlash they might face, Jassim did not comprehend and believed that "people are not so ignorant as to take revenge ... for the act of a few Saudi extremists who destroyed the building" (32). Unlike Jassim, Salwa was alert to the impact of the attacks and consequences brought about on the entire Arab community from various aspects. When Salwa tried to open Jassim's eyes and rise his awareness to the risks around them, he did not understand and regarded her worries unreasonable. Eventually, he discovered that he was completely wrong when "a Sikh gas station attendant in Phoenix was killed in retaliation" (21). The Sikh was mistaken to be a Muslim as he wore a turban and grew a beard.

The first incident that Jassim experienced was on the same day of 9/11 when he was interrupted at the gym of his daily swim by Jack Francs, an ex-marine, who asked about his origin. Knowing that Jassim is from Jordan, Jack revealed, with grudge, that his daughter married a Jordanian and "she converted. She's an Arab now (6). Further, Jack inquired if Jassim's wife is American, and when he learned that she is an Arab, he asked if "she veiled?" and "beautiful?" (7). Then, Jack described a beautiful woman at his bank from Jordan whose name starts with S and sounds like Sally, saying: "I'm just amazed by the beauty of the women there; incredible, the hair and the eyes. No wonder you fellas cover them up" (7). Later on, it became clear that

Jassim is under surveillance by Jack Francs who considers himself as the eyes and ears of the government and finally reports him to the FBI.

Salwa also experienced discrimination at her workplace and suddenly found herself an object of prejudice and distrust simply because of her Arabic identity. In the bank, a native Tucsonan client refused to deal with Salwa and claimed that she would be comfortable to discuss her bank account with someone who “can understand better”(114). Once the lady came to know Salwa’s origin, she reacted in prejudice, “What do you mean that you are Palestinian from Jordan? *Does it mean you will steal my money and blow up my world?*”(113). Although Salwa is an American citizen, she was perceived by the American white women as a social threat who will misuse her account to blow up America. Such unjustified hostility make it clear that “after September 11, Arab Americans have fallen one step behind other social outsiders, being branded not only as second-rate citizens but also as social hazards” (Banita,2010,p.46). It is through this incident that Salwa realized how her citizenship is so vulnerable and can be stripped away from her easily due to the mainstream’s treatment with her as a racialized other.

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Since the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks were Muslims, Islam was regarded as the enemy and Arab Americans as well as Arab-looking individuals were seen as threat to America’s national security, “Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us” (56). Despite the fact that Jassim belonged to the upper middle class and enjoys a good social position that allows him to wear designer clothes and be clear-shaven, he was perceived scary and dangerous due to his Arabic appearance. While he was shopping in a local mall along with Salwa, he wandered over a motorbike parked in front of the garment store and suddenly a security guard started following him because he was already reported as a threat. Salwa got angry, and when she asked the clerk about the reason behind calling a security guard on Jassim, she replied that he “was just standing and looking at the motorcycle. It was weird ... He just scared me ... like he was high or something”(30). Upon hearing the cause of suspicion, Salwa got much irritated and replied, in rage, “I am sorry to hear that. Are you planning to have every Arab arrested now? ... Do you not use your brains?”(30). Then, the lady who called the security revealed that her uncle died in the Twin Towers which made her scared of Arab-Americans. Furthermore, she informed Salwa that her manager encouraged her to report anything suspicious, and that they put snipers on the mall’s rooftop to encounter any danger. Through this scene, Halaby highlights the predicament of Arab Americans’ failure to assimilate into the American mainstream because they cannot pass easily like other ethnicities but rather suspected and questioned on account of their race and appearance. Commenting on the situation of Arab American Muslims in the United States post 9/11, Nadine Naber concludes:

Persons perceived to be an ‘Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim’ were targeted by harassment or violence based on the assumption ‘they’ embody a potential for terrorism and are thus threats to US national security and deserving of discipline and punishment (279).

As a matter of fact, since Jassim’s job allowed him access to the water supply of the city, his boss at the firm, Marcus, started to get phone calls from clients who expressed their anxiety to deal with Jassim because he is an Arab Muslim. Clients obviously had fears that Jassim might do an act of evil by poisoning city’s drinking water. Besides Jassim’s co-workers changed their behavior and treated him as a potential suspect. All his movements were under the supervision until he found a business card on his office from an FBI agent who requested to speak to him. Meanwhile, Salwa felt some void inside her and thought that having a child would fill the gap. So, she secretly stopped taking birth control pills because Jassim was not fond of babies and consequently got pregnant which did not last long as Salwa miscarried later on. When Jassim learned about Salwa’s pregnancy and miscarriage in addition to the conspiracy of his colleagues at work, he was deeply hurt. While driving home and preoccupied by the miseries surrounding his life, he accidentally hit a skateboarder guy named Evan who ultimately died. This incident devastated his mentality and heavily burdened him, although the witness officer on the scene declared Jassim innocent and cleared him of any wrongdoing.

Jasim underwent an interrogation by two FBI agents who seemed to know about Jasim and his family more than he even did. They asked about Evan’s accident, his wife, their phone calls and money sent to Jordan, etc. Furthermore, the agents went far in investigating Jassim as if he was the ‘enemy within’ by asking weird questions such as “What was your reaction to the events of September 11th? ... Would your reaction have been different if it had been expected? ... How often do you pray in a mosque? ... Did you ever meet any of the hijackers personally?”(231). To Jassim, such irrelevant questions are mere accusations of guilt, and in an

attempt to defend himself against their probe, Jassim painfully clarified that his life routine is similar to most Americans. His job, as a hydrologist, is to ensure water quality and availability. As a regular citizen who “happens to be an Arab,” he has access to the city’s water supply, but he has no intention to misuse it. The fact that he is an “Arab” and a “Muslim” should not raise any doubts that he is capable of doing harm (Halaby, 232).

It is evident that Jassim’s boss Marcus believed that he is a good Arab-American, so when the FBI met Marcus before the interrogation, he assured them that Jassim is reliable and as apolitical and unreligious person. However, some facts changed Marcus’s attitude towards Jassim such as cancelling some clients their contracts with the company because of Jassim’s Arab Muslim identity as well as knowing about Jassim’s accident from the FBI in addition to finding on his desk an article on the engineering faults in the Twin Towers; all these things intensified Marcus’s concerns and left him with no choice but to fire Jassim from the job. Marcus’s decision to terminate Jassim was based on his keenness about the profitability of the firm and out of ‘imperative patriotism’ which Steven Salaita describes as a kind of nationalistic attitude in the post-9/11 United States that requires agreement to a specific idea of security and the national interest. Imperative patriotism uses a specific ethnic image to create a difference between “us” and “them,” with “us” representing decent Americans and “them” representing wrongdoers. Typical images of “them” are sometimes accompanied by stereotypes of Middle Eastern men, such as beards, dark complexion, threatening eyes, and so forth. Americans like Jassim who are unlucky enough to fit that stereotype automatically become menacing (Salaita, 88).

Due to the harsh treatment faced by Jassim and Salwa as a result of the backlash, everyone got preoccupied with the daily sufferings imposed on them which distracted them from each other and led to their alienation. This became evident by the couple’s lack of communication as they no longer share things together. Both of them ended up involved in extra-marital affairs, Jassim with a waitress at a café and Salwa with a younger co-worker named Jake. In such a hostile atmosphere and feelings of guilt, the couple grievously recognized that America brought them only material gains and, in return, snatched out their spiritual peace. Thus, they found themselves nostalgic for their origins; Jassim “felt unsettled in his beloved America, vaguely longed for home... other Arabs”(165) and Salwa decided to end her affair with Jake and get back to Jordan because life in America “was not the life she wanted”(91). Before her departure, Salwa visited Jake in his apartment to bid him farewell and he had rage and assaulted her with a heavy picture frame on her head saying “Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch”(332). Towards the end of the novel, Salwa eventually ended up laying bloodied and disfigured in a hospital while Jassim who knows nothing about her affair is sitting next to her.

Conclusion

The novel “*Once in a Promised Land*” (2007) is a literary response to the post 9/11 political atmosphere as well as the media and literary misrepresentations of Arab-American Muslims. Laila Halaby seemed to make the reader understand that instead of the prevailing idea of the United States as a ‘melting pot’ in which all Americans mingle and get equal treatment, it has become a ‘boiling pot’ in the wake of 9/11 that rejects all Muslims in general and Arab-Americans in particular. America has never been a ‘Promised Land’ for Jassim and Salwa as they were pushed to live on the margin; leading to their marginalization, discriminatory profiling, and alienation. Ultimately, their American Dream collapsed and became an illusion.

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