

MUSLIM AMERICANS DELIMMA POST 9/11 IN LAILA HALABY'S *ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND*

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ABSTRACT

September 11th attacks held the biggest tragedy in American history. It was a day of grief, and it proved that America was not immune to attacks and threat. Afterwards life has changed not only for the American Muslims but also American Christians and Jews and to people from other religions. The cruelty of that day has left its shed particularly on the Muslims' life in America who in reality had nothing to do with the attacks. Arab American Muslim writer Laila Halaby's novel, *Once in a Promised Land*, intensely displays the problems that Arab Muslims went through after September 11th attacks. This paper discusses this issue through analysing Halaby's novel, where she deals with the issues such as discrimination, stereotype, and prejudice. This paper presents the two main characters of the novel Salma and Jassim and the crisis they encountered after the attacks.

Keywords: alteration, discrimination, identity loss, Muslim writers, stereotype.

INTRODUCTION

The 9/11 American catastrophe, with its fluctuated results, has turned into a veritable dig of crude material for inventive writers, both inside and outside the United States. It has been so monstrous, broad, and stunning in its effect upon society, culture, and legislative issues. And among the American books, that have drawn on 9/11 and its aftermaths is *Once in a Promised Land*; a novel written by the Arab American female writer, Laila Halaby. The book is of an exceptional note.

Laila Halaby was born in Beirut to an American mother and a Jordanian father. She grew up in Arizona. She has an undergraduate degree in Arabic and Italian, and two Masters Degrees in Arabic literature and in counseling. She now works as a counselor in Arizona for the University of Arizona's college of public health. Her first novel *West of the Jordan* won Beyond Margins award, and her novel *Once in a Promised Land* is also famous for its winning a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Author selection. Because of its significance, it was named as one of the best works of fiction in 2007 by The Washington Post (<http://lailahalaby.net/bio/>).

Halaby portrays the Americans as xenophobic characters filled with doubt and blinded by stereotyping. Most of her Arab characters are seen as devoid of their culture and religion. In her analysis of the Arab experience in America she confirms American scholar Alixa Naff's statement that: "In their eagerness to succeed, the immigrant generation neglected

to preserve their cultural heritage" (Naff, 35). Halaby proclaims that the conflicts that exist between the West and East are the main reason of poverty, drought, war, and many other global problems. To her, it is because of these problems that 9/11 occurred.

Arab Americans are not newly immigrants. In fact, their history goes back to the first wave of Arabs in the nineteenth century. During 1870 different groups from places like Syria, Lebanon and Jordan left their homelands and went to America in search for a better life rather than the one under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. After the Second World War, other Muslim groups came. This was the second wave of Arab Immigrants. The third wave came after the 1970s and still coming till this day. All those Arabs migrated with the hope to get a better future (Loue and Sajatovic, 2012). Therefore, this research attempts to trace the lives of the main characters in the novel as they are both Muslims and living in America when the 9/11 attacks take place.

STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

Halaby's narrative style is an interesting one. She is influenced by Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*. Her vision on 9/11 as a wide series of global concerns is clear in her way of using techniques and imagery that are used by Silko's novel. In the same way, Halaby mixes Arabic stories with western fairy tales to reveal the conflicts between the East and West. Both Halaby and Silko emphasize on ending

conflicts and encourage help between countries. They both promote and call for peace and treaty among the nations and cultures. Halaby's concern that global problems would arise bad consequences on the entire world not America alone is much similar to Silko's warning in *Ceremony* that nuclear bombs would disturb all countries all over the world (Lloyde 28-33).

In her novel, *Once in a Promised Land*, Halaby uses Arabic folktales and combines them with western fairy tales which comes from her influence by Silko's mixing of traditional native with modern American folklore (Ibid 28). For example, at the very beginning of the novel, Halaby begins it with a very common opening in Arabic Folktales "kanya ma kan fee qadeem az-zamaan that." (Once in a Promised Land, VII) instead of the English version once upon a time. It is still used whenever someone wants to begin telling a story. This technique could also refer to Halaby's pride of her Arabic culture.

Halaby blends her plot and characters with Arabic folktales. Early in the novel, she uses the folk tale of the Ghula as a great metaphor for Salwa and America. Salwa's grandmother tells the traditional Arabic children's tale that is called "Nus Nsays" which means half of the halving. In the story the character, Nus Nsays, destroys the Ghula who is a character that looks like a witch. Nus Nsays refuses the witch's material. The grandmother adds that Nus Nsays is small because the story shows that small characters can beat strong ones with determination and cleverness. It is clear from the tale that Nus Nsays stands for Salwa or the Arabs in America while the Ghula represents America. However, there is a difference between the actual folktale and the novel. In the tale, Nus defeats the Ghula while in Halaby's novel it is Salwa who is defeated by America at the end of the novel. Also, another difference is that Nus Nsays is not like Salwa for he refuses to believe that material gains bring happiness (Altwaiji, 118-120).

In "The Formative and Processual: A Study of Hypertext/Postcolonial aesthetic," Jaishree Odin, a scholar at the University of Hawaii Honolulu, discusses the use of hyper-textuality and multiplicity of postcolonial works combined with postmodern ones. In literature, a hypertext is a text that is derived from an earlier work which is called hypo-text (Martin and Ringham 140). The very word was first defined by Gerard Genette, a French theorist, as:

Hyper-textuality refers to any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypo-text), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary."So, a hypertext derives from hypo-text(s) through a process which

Genette calls transformation, in which text B "evokes" text A without necessarily mentioning it. (Dillon 89)

Hyper-textuality allows different voices and subjects that share the same idea to be used in a certain novel. One of the literary examples that best prove this prospective is Robert Antoni's novel *Divina Trace*. It uses eight narrators among them a monkey and statue to tell the story and conflicted identity of the monstrous frog Magalena. In the same way Halaby uses in her novel postcolonial stories through different narrators like Salwa's grandmother to add meaning to her postmodern novel and also to suggest that the past literary works can serve the postmodern ones greatly. It becomes hard sometimes to the readers to understand the whole meaning put together but it is through these narrators and tales the characters like Salma's the intended messages are evoked.

Halaby also uses another story that focuses on a farmer girl who was born in a land where her parents worked believing that they could change their faith. The Ghula then starts to get close to the girl and brain wash her thoughts because she eventually wants to eat her. The Ghula here holding on to the girl is a metaphor of Salwa's attachment to the American dream. The Ghula tries to change the girl's thoughts just like America did with Slawa when it made her believe that it is a country where everyone is carefree, and where everyone is given his rights. Thus Halaby cleverly uses Arabic folktale with her plot to capture the reader's attention, make it more realistic, and show the world the beauty of the Arabic folktales (Lloyd, 25-27).

It is unique to use tales as metaphors to illustrate the closeness of the novel's plot to a specific culture's tale. Using beautiful images and tales like those above help Halaby to deliver her message clearly to the readers. In this novel Halaby depicts how Arab Muslims felt when they first entered America and how they had always pictured America as a great country "Promised Land" as the major characters do in the novel. She also reflects upon the disillusionment of Muslims who realized only after 9/11 how fabricated their picture of America is (Fateh and Mortada, 66).

DISCUSSION

1. ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND

The title of the novel – *Once in a Promised Land*, gives a hint to the readers about the Promised Land – America, or in fact how the whole world sees it. It is believed that the Promised Land is a religious reference. The land which was given to Abraham and his dependents by God (Greidanus, 225). The title, with its profound, scriptural allusiveness to the Israelites' mass migration out of Egypt and to the guaranteed arrive, is a sign to the novel's main theme of the thwarted expectation of Arab-Americans in the US, the nation they had picked, ventured to, and made their own, longing for opportunity, thriving, and equity.

However, the word “Once” is tricky. Its usage as a part of the title is the thing that wonderfully subverts the vaunted temperance of the Promised Land, and underscores that they are presently dead (C., 16). Could it be that a person had a dream once in America or any country which eventually turned into a nightmare? Halaby might suggest from this title that it is only a once in a lifetime experience. Therefore, her novel works as a “cautionary tale” that informs the Americans to “transcend binary discourses in order to avoid further crises from escalating either within or beyond American borderline” (Lloyd, 3). Through being a cautionary novel, it seems that Halaby is trying to reveal the shortcomings of the American characters that interact with Salwa and Jassim. Through these flaws, she is trying to make people become aware that they are easily being convinced by the Media that Muslims are bad people.

At the very start of the novel, Halaby requests her readers to put all the prejudice and stereotype in a box and throw it away. As if to say she wants them to sympathize with the Arabs and feel what they experienced after 9/11 (Once in a Promised Land, VIII). It is a request to leave false bias and preconceptions about Muslims in general and Arabs in particular.

The novel focuses on an Arab couple whose life is completely changed after 9/11 attacks. Salwa is “Palestinian by blood, Jordanian by residence, and American by citizenship” (Ibid, 81). Her parents left America because they could not afford a proper living there. They eventually returned to Jordan as they “decided that it was not worth

2. Salwa and Jassim's life before and after 9/11

The beginning of the novel that deals with Salwa and Jassim life in America before 9/11 reflects steadiness and normality. They spent their day either at work or at home. It was the kind of America Salwa always wanted. They were evidently caught up in the American lifestyle (Jinyene, 51). To Alixa Naff, a Lebanese born American historian, Jassim and Salwa “are portrayed as non-practicing Muslims couple who are able to accumulate material luxuries” (Ghouaie1, 276).

losing their souls as they could have nice things. Their lives in Jordan were not so bad, and their life in America was miserable” (Ibid). They felt that a person's concern in America was only material gains. A person would have to work every day without getting enough rest and without having the time to embrace everything around him. In fact, Salwa's father “was working like a dog in a restaurant” (Ibid).

However, Salwa kept dreaming of returning back to America. Despite the fact that she was brought up in Jordan, she always felt attached to America. Salwa's initial interest in America came from her longing to carry on with an existence of extravagance. As a kid, Salwa was always named “Miss Pajamas” (3) because her aunt brought her a couple of silk night wear from Thailand. Silk is an image of extravagance and solace; it influences Salwa to feel like a ruler.

To her, America is the promised land. She even left Hassan the man who loved her sincerely in Jordan for her pursuit of the American Dream. He refused to go to Romania at first just to stay with Salwa, yet she eventually left him for another man (Fateh and Ilhem, 66-67).

Salwa married Jassim whom she met in Jordan as he came to his homeland to give a lecture on the importance of water. She was not attracted to the lecture as much as to the fact that Jassim was “from America” (Once in a Promised Land, 249). She was also attracted to his wealth and his fine job there. These characteristics, as she believes, were way beyond Hassan's reach. She felt that this was her only chance, thus she had to grab it. She did not hesitate for one minute to leave everything behind– Hassan, her home, and her family. However, it was not only Salwa who was attracted to Jassim's connection to America, but Jassim himself was also excited with the idea that she had an American ID which would enable them “both to stay. Forever, if he chooses.” (Ibid, 81). Eventually, he proposed to her and Salwa accepted without hesitation.

The author emphasizes the idea that Salwa was not in love with Jassim; this fact is indicated in the text. The readers could plainly feel no spark of love and no passion between them. She only wanted a chance that would enable her to go to America and that chance was supplied to her by Jassim.

Halaby presents the couple daily life lacking nearly all religious rituals. However, both characters are later judged because of their religion. Instead they seldom practice their religious rituals, especially Jassim, who did not look like he believes in God as he says during a conversation with his father, “I don't believe in God, and I hope.” (Once in a Promised Land, 57). Instead of praying Salat al-Fajr in the morning, Jassim “woke up at this time, usually a minute or two before the alarm, so he could drive to the fitness bar, swim, come home, and still be able to spend morning time

with his wife" (Ibid, 14). This became his morning routine for years. Sometimes, he would feel that his faith decreased while the water in his lungs increased because of his love for water and swimming. Salwa too is portrayed as non-practicing Muslim. Yet she used many expressions that hold the name of God. For example, "there is no God but God." (100). This expression basically means Al Tawheed in Arabic, which is the belief in Allah as the one and lone God. However, it is culturally used by a lot of Muslims regularly to reflect certain feeling of grief, woe, anxiety or bother. So her statement does not precisely show the dedication to her religion.

The America that Salwa dreamed of changed after the 9/11 attacks. Salwa and Jassim's lives totally became shattered and devastated. They both started to face discrimination and hate from Americans just because they were Muslims (E. Al-Ibia 22). That is why Halaby at the very beginning of the novel tells her readers that "Salwa and Jassim "are both Arabs. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the world trade center" (Once in a Promised Land, 9). So she immediately put the fact that they were innocent people as much as any other American citizen.

Before, they seemed to be able to keep a balance identity that is a mixture of both Arabic and American. On the one hand, they tried to stay in touch with Arab American families and on the other hand, they adjusted to the lifestyle of the American and kept themselves luxurious by buying expensive cars, towels, and silk pajamas. But after the attacks, they started to find it difficult to balance both identities and therefore they felt lost (Lloyd, 7). This is pretty much the core of the Arab-American writing after 9/11, according to Mana Al Said. The characters depicted in the novels become "trapped in an attempt to redefine their identity, and reconstruct a hybridity that seems impossible in a world that is divided into 'we' and 'them'" (Said, 201). 'we' being the Americans and 'them' the Arabs who are blamed for every criminal act.

At first, they never thought that 9/11 could ever cause a backlash. When they received calls, Jassim did not understand their family concerns as he thought that "people are not so ignorant as to take revenge on a Lebanese family for the act of a few Saudi extremists who destroyed those building" (Once in a Promised Land, 32). People in the world know America as the land of dreams, humanity, and equality. Among those people are Salwa and Jassim. However, on the other side there are people who see the contrary like Salwa's parents. They believe it to be a land where a person finds difficulty in being who he is. So after 9/11 America was no longer the land of equality and humanity because Muslims were severely discriminated. As a reaction to what the attacks caused, the Americans felt that their attitude against Muslims

were justified so there was no need for equality as everyone should be treated according to their religion.

Though they felt deeply sad for what happened to the innocent victims of the attack, the Americans around them could not see that. To Americans, the majority of Muslims stood with the hijackers. For that reason, Salwa's coworker, Joan, gave her a flag and told her to put it on her car saying "you never know what people are thinking, and having this will let them know where you stand" (Ibid 66). Yet again there were many Muslims who did not put flags on their cars, but they were supportive and the opposite could be true. This brought fear to Salwa. She feared that 9/11 would bring a backlash towards Arabs.

However, things started to go from bad to worse. Jassim was proved wrong when "a sikh gas station attendant in Phoenix was killed in retaliation" (Halaby, 32). He was killed because of his appearance. He was only doing his usual work as a gas station attendant, yet he did not know that he would be a victim to the prejudice that resulted from 9/11. This act according to Salwa is stupid and nonsense. This alongside many other acts is an act of statistical discrimination. It produced a nonstop discrimination everywhere.

On a beautiful morning where worries were put behind by the couple, Salwa and Jassim decided to go shopping. They expected it to be a warm day with no obstacles yet at the moment they sat their foot in the mall they were treated differently from other customers. Jassim was followed by a security man who suspected his behavior. Not wanting to cause a scene, he told Salwa to leave the whole matter and go back home. But she went to the clerk and asked her why a security was sent after them to which the woman answered that Jassim looked suspicious. Amber, the woman who called the security, told Salwa that Jassim scared her as he kept staring like he was "high or something. And then I remembered all the stuff that's been going on" (Once in a Promised Land, 30). She remembered 9/11 as her uncle was one of the victims who died on that day. Here, Salwa answered her saying "I am sorry to hear that. Are you planning to have every Arab arrested now?" She paused for just a second" (Ibid). Salwa assumed that the wealthy appearance of her husband would blur his ethnic background. To her, Jassim looks quite wise and charming; it is unfair to judge him according to his race or religion (29-31).

Like most Americans, Amber held in her mind a stereotypical idea, believing that Arabs are terrorists. She was in fact ordered by her manager to report anything suspicious. The manager told Salwa that they even put snipers on the roof just in case something dangerous happens. So living a normal life turned into a challenge (42).

These incidents tell the readers that America became an unwelcoming country because it is never right to suspect

someone just because of his appearance or the way he looks at things. It is not only the clerk to blame but also the manager. After all, the manager's job is to calm the clerk and not spread hateful ideas in their minds about religions or people from different religions because there are people who do not accept these attitudes not only Muslims but also Americans from other religions and ethnicities because the world is not only filled with bad. Good and evil could be found in any nation, race, ethnicity, and religion.

Salwa strived to live in America and act as one through imitating the western way of life, however as things changed she begun to feel that she has made a mistake. For the first time Salwa felt that she was missing something. She wanted to have a baby to fill that gap, but Jassim was not fond of babies. She stopped taking birth control pills for four days and eventually got pregnant without letting him know. At that moment something awakened her and made her realize how wrong things were and how material gains in America would never bring her spiritual peace. Thus she realized that this was not the America she had always pictured in her mind (Ghouaiel, 287).

Halaby seems to imply through the novel that the alienation Jassim and Salwa experienced increased because of their fabricated image of the American Dream or life. After the attacks, someone or something awakened them and it was the discrimination they faced. This shows that humans need an incident or a person to awake them from their illusions. This is a necessary thing in life because if it was not for the bad treatment Salwa and Jassim faced, they would have stayed with their illusions for a long time.

Moreover, the impact of 9/11 affected the couple's relationship; they no longer talk to each other or share things together. At work things were not better and because of the harsh treatment Salwa got from the American customers at the bank, she found solace in Jake's company who was her coworker. Similarly, as Jassim became the subject of constant investigation, guilt and accusation, he went to Penny, a waitress at a café, he always visited. Jake sees Salwa as a person who is complete for him, a person who is beautifully exquisite "mature without seeming old...The challenge of this combination turned him on, and he wondered if all Arab women had this allure." (Once in a Promised Land 171).

In the same way, Jassim's attraction to Penny was not real as Steven Salaita, American author and scholar, views in *Modern Arab Americans Fiction*. He sees Jassim's disturbed mentality caused him to flee in her arms. He says "Jassim's innate attraction to Penny, then, arises from a certain feeling of alienation that he imagines Penny can satisfy. Penny's attraction to Jassim arises from the same hope, though she indicates that she is interested mainly in the lifestyle that Jassim's income might provide (Salaita 91).

Penny seems to be a patriotic character who sees war on Terror as beneficial for the world. Each time the American president spoke about the war on terror, Penny was outraged and sickened for she could not believe that there were sinister people who would harm the innocent Americans. In fact, she wished that she could enroll in the American forces so that she could show the world how Americans are true heroes (Lloyde, 10).

Penny is a patriotic character, yet she is in a way racist too. She viewed the Arabs as terrorists and said during a conversation with her friend that "Jassim is a good guy- he is not like them, should not be judged like them. But those people over there, they oppress women and kill each other" (Once in a Promised Land, 292). Penny did not include Jassim in her categorization, maybe because of his wealth. She claimed that Arabs were terrorists who treat women badly. Here, Halaby focuses on the true fact that most Americans address Arabs with 'them' verses 'us' mentality. It is this mentality that causes so many problems in the world (Juiyene, 49).

It is only after he knows about Salwa's pregnancy and miscarriage that Jassim started to act irrationally and hit a boy in the middle of the road named Evan. This incident makes him mentally devastated as he became constantly haunted by the idea that he actually killed a human being. He did not tell Salwa anything about the event. This shows the readers how wide is the gap between them. In fact, he informed Penny instead.

The irony lies in the fact that Evan was an anti-Islamists; he hated Muslims and felt that they should leave the country. In fact, a "terrorist haunting license" was written on his skateboard which shows how much he hated Arabs (Once in a Promised Land, 76). Jassim later visited Evan's mother and it was she who told him about Evan's anti-Islamism. She told Jassim that she kept telling Evan that "two wrongs do not make a right that most Arabic people do not have anything to do with this" (Ibid 201), yet he would not listen.

Still, the way Evan's mother, Mary, talked reflects considerable tacit fear and hatred against Arabs. She claimed that they "were all scared those people were going to blow us all up. People were going to blow us all up" (211). Fear is justified, but when it reaches the state of discrimination and generalizing then it will not be accepted. People like Mary want some sort of cure. According to the Americans, discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice are the cure. She even curses God twice as she was shocked that her son was murdered at the hand of an Arab. As if God has punished her son for the wrong beliefs he held.

As time passes by, things got worse, especially for Jassim. He became totally frustrated when he found a blue card in his office on which the following note was written:

“Noelle James.... Federal Bureau of investigation... would like to ask you some questions.” (223). So, he called the investigator and they arranged a meeting.

From the beginning of the interview, they seemed to know who Jassim exactly was. They had a great deal of information about him, his wife, and even Evan's incident. It was not an accident as Halaby suggests. The boy looked as he had intentionally turned his skateboard, “pushed off and jumped... into the front of Jassim’s car.” (Once in a Promised Land, 117). Jassim even revealed to the police officers that the boy kept looking at him like he was planning to do something. However, no matter how much Jassim tried to convince himself that it was only an accident, he could not get over the idea that he killed a human being.

It was not a usual investigation it was as if they were accusing Jassim. He did not feel comfortable throughout the whole interview because the investigators kept asking weird questions like “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?” (Ibid, 231). It seems that Jassim’s problem is the fact of being an Arab and a Muslim. He even said that himself. Otherwise, why would the police ask him about his reaction to 9/11? Why would they ask whether he prayed or not? These kinds of questions reveal a discriminatory behavior.

Jassim was verbally discriminated. Despite the fact that he stated his sorrow and disturbances about the attacks, yet the investigators asked him “would your reaction have been different if it had to be expected?” (231). How can it possibly be that a person who clearly had nothing to do with the attacks expected it to happen unless he was involved in it? This was clear that the investigators wanted to reveal so much of his character. They were trying to hear what they want, to hear that he did intentionally kill Evan or was involved in the attacks. They did not want to hear the truth, he said, because it was the opposite of what they wanted to believe. This plainly reflects how America feared every Arabic person. In fact, agent Fletcher referred to Jassim’s access to the entire city water supply with the means to tamper with it. He did not trust him. He doubted that Jassim might do something dangerous like poisoning the water to which Jassim replied

I have no desire to abuse it. The mere fact that I am an Arab should not add suspicion to the matter. 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. (232)

Jassim has always been passionate about water, his love for the water is sometimes bigger than anything else in

his life and for that reason he would never use it to kill people as he is not a person who is driven by hate or spiteful. Yet the investigators did not think of it in such way but only thought of him as someone who is dangerous to the Americans. So they miss treated him and discriminated him because of his religion. Jassim could not believe that such situation would happen to him “Things like this are not supposed to happen in America. Americans are pure, simple people, their culture governed by a few basic tents, not complicated conspiracy theories” (299). As time goes by, he realizes that he was wrong in thinking Americans to be rich. When he finds out that many Americans struggle with poverty, he is amazed that a country with so much wealth could allow such conditions happen. For the first time, he observes that there are “shaved heads and snotty-nosed children, food stamps, tattered smiles, ill-fitting false teeth, tobacco-stained fingers, and fourteen-hour-shift bloodshot eyes (275).

Day after day Salwa also realizes her own mistake and her sadness subsequently led her fall in the arms of Jake a drug dealer and a man with two masks; one at work where he was completely gentleman and one at night where he became a drug and sex addict (Ghouaiel, 292). Halaby declares that, “It was as though he were two people: one who went through the day doing what was expected of him, going to class, going to work, and one who was entirely focused on maintaining his high and having sex” (Once in a Promised Land 170). Jake is good at manipulating people and seduces women easily just to get what he wants. All of a sudden he starts becoming interested in learning Arabic language and attending classes as he thinks it the language of opium. He even refers to Afghanistan as the country of opium, but what he does not know is that Afghanistan is clearly not an Arabic country, nor Arabic is the language of opium, but his opinion is merely as those of many people in the world who start making false facts about Islam without actually knowing that these facts are completely false. Halaby seems to focus on the idea that since Jake “told no one his reason for taking the class, no one could correct him and tell him that Arabic was quite definitely not the language of opium” (52). It is exactly like what the media did to Americans back at 9/11 time, it did not try entirely to give people the truth but rather were brainwashing them. So it is not a strange thing that Jake thinks of the Arab or Islamic countries in this way since they were very judged.

The novel also shows the food effect on Salwa and Jassim. Food is a way that takes the human from the present to the past. It gives them a good and a bad feeling. It gives them pleasure of remembering their culture yet makes them regret leaving their roots. While tasting fennel seeds, Salwa remembered her Arabic husband and Arabic identity as she was sitting with Jake. It did not leave her caught up in the moment but reminded her that what she was doing is wrong.

Jake held out a small plastic container with tiny seeds coated in pink and white and yellow. I love these. Actually, I've only had them like this in Indian restaurants, but we use shumur, fennel, in some foods, and the flavor is so distinct that one bite and I taste them." The crack of fennel in her mouth brought back desserts eaten only during Ramadan, brought back home in one tiny burst and then another, fireworks in her mouth that took away her breath. (208-209)

Jassim also remembers the taste of his culture and the past through food when he constantly remembers the lunch he had at his uncle's farm: "The wrinkle unfolded at lunch, over lamb that had been roasted with garlic in the outdoor stove. For years to come Jassim could taste it, the garlic having left a pleasing taste in the recesses of his mouth and, later, in his years of being away, a taste of home" (39). The memory also came to his mind after 9/11 as he felt that it was an escape from the cruel treatment he was facing:

Jassim slid into the water at the end of lane, the tension of the past two weeks detaching itself in clumps, the wreckage of four planes cluttering the space around him, ash filling his lungs...As he swam steadily, Jassim's thoughts tiptoed away from this picture and down a dusty path leading to his youth, to an early summer afternoon spent with his uncle Abu Jalal. (39)

Salwa has a close friend whom she always turned to whenever she wants to let out everything in her heart and that is Rand. Unlike Salwa, Rand seems to be satisfied with her life in America. Her connection with her culture and Jordan managed to keep her "fingers stuffed with centuries of wisdom, knots of history and meaning" (91). She does not feel homesick or anything else because she took part of her homeland with her, her culture. Unlike Salwa, she managed to keep in touch with her roots through food, coffee, Arabic TV channels, and devotion to religion and traditions. She tells Salw: "You don't know what you're missing without satellite TV. It's like being home" (283). Thus she never feels alone or disconnected from her culture nor country because for her coffee is among the many things that help her soul stay calm:

Randa pulled the pot off the burner and added two spoonfuls of coffee, each heaped to the ceiling. She stirred them in, reached across the continental United States, stretched her arm across the Atlantic until she found Beirut, and ... the coffee boiled away thousands of miles of homesickness. (283,284)

That is why she always reminds Salwa of home. Watching Rand is so content with her life, Salwa asks whether she is happy or not to which Rand replies with her own perception of happiness. She tells Salwa that she is happy with her husband and children and she could not ask for more than that. To Rand living in America is "easier here than at home... But American life, as [she] see it, lacks flavor, that tastiness you find at home" (283). When Salwa tells her about her relationship with Jake, Rand advises her to go back to Jordan to spend some quality time there: "You need to go home for a little while. You need to be with your mother and sisters' and your culture, where things like this can't happen..." (288). Thus Rand feels that Salwa needs to feel belonged to her own roots more than America because that way she will be able to save her marriage and feel guilty that having an affair with Jake is not a good thing.

Before Salwa's departure, she goes to Jake's apartment to say goodbye. On her way, she observes three Mexican immigrants working. One of them "smiled as she walked by and greeted her with an accented hello" (361). She starts to imagine all the miles and the hardships they went through "to have their clear shot at the American Dream" which turns out to be nothing but a lie as she screams deep down in her heart to them (361).

Jake cannot handle her farewell so he starts yelling: "so you are running back to the pigsty you came from" (320) because he thought that she would leave her husband and become his wife. He never thought of her leaving to Jordan. That was his plan which eventually has failed. He starts accusing her saying that she only came for "You came because you want sex. That's why. That's what all of this has been about. I've cared about you and you've used me." (319). When in fact it was Jake who used Salwa because deep down he never really wanted her as a wife. When she crosses the doorstep, he attacks violently her saying "Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch" (332). She falls from the stairs with blood from her head all over the ground. Then the Mexican man helps her by putting a handkerchief under her head and telling her that the police will come. This small situation, Halaby put in the novel, has a deep meaning which is that people from different nations or religions should help each other because in the end they are humans regardless of who they are or where they came from. Salwa eventually ends up in a hospital. The act of hitting Salwa reveals how abandoned Jake feels because he could not accept the breakup with Salwa so he tries to show his manhood through hitting her.

Lying on that bed with her husband, Salwa and Jassim finally realize that they should not have left Jordan or their families back at home. Yet people only realize their mistakes after they are done. After so many hardships and the discrimination, the couple come to know the truth that

America is not the Promised Land. It is the land that discriminated and treated them indifferently. It is the land where material gains are put first above everything else. It is the land, as Rand describes it, where one does not feel the special flavor of home in it.

CONCLUSION

Through discussing Laila Halaby's main characters Jassim and Salwa, the research displays the difficulties Muslims had faced after the 9/11 attacks. She blames both Americans and Muslims for the inconvenience and harassment that took place in America. The American systems and policies regarded the whole Muslims as terrorists, dangerous and subject of suspect. However, through her text, she also blames the Muslims and asks them to stay true to who they are and not caught in a world of material gains. They admired the American culture and style of life; they thought it to be complete and beautiful dream they desired to accomplish, but eventually turned out to be a nightmare. For that illusion, Jassim at the end of the novel come to a realization that "Salwa would have been better off staying in Jordan." (Once in a Promised Land, 326). Thus this novel is a call for justice, humanity, and for accepting no matter what their religion is or where they come from.

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