

Post-9/11 America and Arab-American experience in Halaby' *Once in a Promised Land* by Shihabudheen C

Abstract

Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* is one of the most interesting of novels published in post-9/11 America. No one, who is interested in contemporary American fiction, can overlook this work by Halaby who is herself an Arab American. The novel is noteworthy in that it projects a striking image of America in general and of post-9/11 America in particular. In the process, it poignantly unveils the experience of Arab-Americans in the wake of the 9/11- terrorist onslaught. This paper is an attempt to briefly explore this aspect of the novel. In the current, post-9/11 international political scenario, Halaby's novel certainly has a considerable amount of significance about it. The life of the Arab-American diaspora is of special concern today. For, Americans of Arab origin have all been seekers of the Golden Fleece in America. The novel throws light on how gratifying the Golden Fleece is now to them. Scrutiny of the post-9/11 Arab American experience in the novel will also help us understand some of the issues that even in our civilized world still shadow the phenomenon of exile and expatriation.

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The 9/11 American tragedy, with its varied consequences, has become a veritable mine of raw material for creative writers, both within and without the United States. 9/11, it may be useful to remember here, is the title of a Malayalam novel published in Kerala in 2011. This is an index of the literary preoccupation with 9/11, that still goes on all over the world. This is not surprising. For, 9/11 has been so massive, extensive, and shocking in its impact upon society, culture, and politics everywhere. As such, literature, which is at bottom a criticism of life, can never remain insensitive to 9/11. Among the American novels, that have drawn on 9/11 and its aftermaths, the Arab-American woman writer, Laila Halaby's *once in a Promised Land* (2007) is of special note. Halaby's predominant concern is the Arab-American community and the shifting nature of their existence in post-9/11 American society. She unveils the fears, anxieties, obstacles, and the prodigious sense of insecurity and disenchantment experienced by the Arab-American diaspora consequent on the 9/11 catastrophe. This paper is an attempt to briefly look at this aspect of her novel.

The very title of the novel, with its deep, biblical allusiveness to the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt and to the promised land, is a cue to the novel's central theme of the disillusionment of Arab-Americans in the US, the country they had chosen, journeyed to, and made their own, dreaming of freedom, prosperity, and equality. The word 'once', used in the title is what beautifully subverts the vaunted virtues of the Promised Land, and underscores that they are now defunct.

Once in a Promised Land is the story of Salwa and Jassim, an immigrant Jordanian Muslim couple, who have been living and working in Tucson, a city a few kilometres from New York, for about nine years prior to the occurrence of 9/11. Jassim works as a Hydrologist and Salwa as a banker. She also functions as a real estate agent during her spare time. They are both of them competent and dedicated to their work, and are American by citizenship. They live the secular way. And, they take extreme care to construct and keep up an American identity, by conforming to American ways and norms. They have absolutely no qualms about being assimilated into American culture, about melting into the American socio-cultural pot. However, with 9/11 winds of change begin to sweep across their life and existence, and they begin to see with clarity how the dominant white American society actually sees, and have been seeing, them, simply on account of their being of Arab-Muslim descent. They become acutely aware of their real predicament through a series of disheartening and humiliating experiences. They are now exposed to more of surveillance and they suffer more of discrimination, prejudice, and hostility. These, by degrees, militate against their American certitudes. The feeling that they can no longer occupy a safe, secure, successful, and egalitarian space in America eventually overwhelms them.

It is through a series of strategically- set scenes that Halaby unravels the precariousness of the Arab-American condition in the context of the terror-ridden, post-9/11 American mind-set and imagination. What may be termed the 'bike scene' is one of them. In a mall, Salwa is busy selecting garments. While waiting for her, Jassim's eyes happen to fall on a motorcycle parked in front of the garment store. Then a woman with a handy-talky begins to dog him. Salwa, who senses this, is irritated and asks the woman why she is following her husband. The woman answers that she is a security official and that one of the sales girls has informed her that there is a furtive Arab staring at the motorcycle, as if he would rob everything in the store and escape on the bike. Salwa's reaction to Amber, the informer, is worth noting in this context:

I am sorry to hear that. Are you planning to have every Arab arrested now? 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 talk about in school.
You can say you saw a real live Arab and had to
call security on him (30).*

The fact is that one member of the girl's family had been killed in the 9/11 attack. As a consequence, she has developed a great fear for the Arab-American Muslim. It is this terror and prejudice that distorts her imagination and makes her view Jassim's innocuous behaviour with fantasised suspicion. Salwa and Jassim succeed in extracting an apology from the girl. But, nevertheless, the experience serves as an eye-opener to them.

Salwa's encounter with the white American woman who comes to the bank to open an account is equally significant. On hearing that Salwa is a Palestinian from Jordan, the woman's countenance falls. In anger and arrogance, she asks Salwa:

*What does that mean?
What do you mean that you are Palestinian from Jordan? Does it
mean you will steal my money and blow up my world? (113)*

In the eyes of the white American woman, Salwa is an outsider, a prospective manipulator of her accounts, an embezzler of her money and a terrorist who will use the money to blow up America. The woman's reference to America as 'my world' reflects her attitude that America belongs to her, the white American, not to Salwa, the non-white Arab American. The woman pig-headedly refuses to be served by Salwa and goes over to another white American official. Racial prejudice and the popular negative stereotyping of the Arab Muslim as bad and evil, as extremist and terrorist, Halaby seems to suggest, are accelerating the exclusion and marginalization of the Arab American Muslim.

Prejudice and discrimination directed against the Arab- American Muslim is shown, most emphatically, through Jassim's ordeals at the workplace. An expert in rainwater harvesting, with an American PhD, Jassim's work is to oversee the supply of water to the residents of the city. However, after 9/11 the giant shadow of suspicion falls on him. Customers report to Marcus, the proprietor of the Company, where Jassim is employed, that they are anxious and apprehensive about their safety. For, Jassim is Arab and Muslim, and so cannot be trusted. He might expertly use the city's water resources to do violence to the city. Who knows if he will not pour poison into the city's drinking water? The customers want Jassim to be immediately fired.

To make his life excruciatingly painful in the professional sphere, there are Jassim's WASP colleagues, Corey, Bella, and Lisa who concertedly conspire against him. They keep him under constant observation, secretly checking his computer, noting down his statements, analysing his looks, moods, and clothes. All this eventually puts Jassim in the hands of the FBI. Halaby's description of the FBI investigation, and the interrogation of Jassim, 'the rich man from the Middle East', is well designed to highlight the hate, hostility, prejudice, and negative preconceptions with which American governmental agencies deal with people of Arab-Muslim stock, in spite of their being American citizens through and through. Jassim and his wife's sentiments on 9/11, phone calls to and from Jordan, amounts of money sent to Jordan, even the number of times they go to pray in the mosque-- all these and a host of other items in their day-to-day life come under the FBI's demoralizingly hair-splitting probe into the psychology and circumstances of Jassim, their potential water-poisoner terrorist. Jassim's agonised words to Agent Fletcher are worth quoting in this context:

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. 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).

To make matters worse for Jassim, his car accidentally runs over a man named Evan Parker. The accident occurs while the FBI investigation is well underway, and Jassim is going through a phase of debilitating mental conflicts. Filled with remorse for the death he has accidentally caused, he approaches Mrs. Parker, the bereaved mother, to apologise. It is then that he learns that Evan was an arrant and uncompromising hater of the Arabs. On hearing that her visitor is an Arab, she laughs and guffaws, perhaps sensing the irony implicit in her son's death. Then, recollecting 9/11, she tells Jassim:

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” (200-201)

The mother, of course, is convinced of Jassim’s innocence. But, nevertheless, because Jassim is an Arab, and the victim a known anti-Arab who used to skate about with the words “Terrorist Hunting Licence” (76) insolently inscribed on his skateboard, some people suspect that Jassim must have intentionally bumped the car into the skating Evan using accident as a ruse and excuse. All this adds up to Jassim’s precarious predicament in the white society.

Arguments and appeals fall on deaf ears. And, to break the camel’s back, Jassim is fired from his job. With this the Salwa-Jassim couple’s cup of misery is full, and their American dream comes to an end. In the meantime, in addition to bearing the brunt of American hate, prejudice, and ostracism along with Jassim, she suffers a miscarriage which is used symbolically, too, by Halaby to suggest the depletion of Arab-American security and happiness on American soil. Her married life, too, suffers certain setbacks. During the course of her, and her husband’s, ordeals, Salwa also slips into a relationship with Jake who is always high on drugs. Eventually, fed up with everything American and prompted by her recurring longing for her Arab roots and milieu, she resolves to return to Jordan. But, circumstances, ironically enough, forbids it. When she goes to bid farewell to Jake and tells him of her resolve, in a fit of fury Jake attacks her and pushes her down the stairs, injuring her seriously. A victim of white American violence, Salwa ends up on a hospital bed, bruised, battered, and nonplussed. To compound her misery, she is also now suspected by the police of trafficking in drugs, and Hassan, who has been incessantly in love with her calls from Jordan to inform her of his marriage to Intizar. Only the shattered Jassim is there to defend her and to trust in her innocence, now. It is with this highly suggestive image that the novel closes. Post-9/11 America with its gargantuan hate and prejudice for the Arab-American, its permissive culture, and its alluring life styles has made a tragic mess of Jassim and Salwa’s life. It may not be presumptuous to suggest here that the image is also Halaby’s powerful metaphor for the general perilousness of the Arab-American Muslims in post-9/11 America.

The Arabs have been in the States for some three generations. However, there has been a long, die-hard tradition of stereotyping them negatively. Popular cultural forms have been the major culprits in this maligning of the Arab and his culture. Perhaps, the culture for which Hollywood, aping earlier representations by the French and the British, has shown its greatest contempt has been the Arab culture. The Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967, and the Arab oil embargo of 1973 also contributed to reinforcing the negative stereotype of the Arab as extremist and terrorist. And lately, 9/11 consolidated this stereotype as never before, promptly identifying the perpetrators of the tragedy with Arab-Muslims. It is this that made the Arab-Americans in general and the Arab-American Muslims particular vulnerable in post-9/11

America. The ‘War on Terror’ that America lost no time in declaring had a double dimension to it. Commenting on it Hainsworth says:

As the scope of the “War on Terror” widened in the United States, it became clear that the battle field in view was as much a domestic one as an international one. The passage is of the Patriot Act authorised what were, in effect, wartime powers of surveillance, data collection, and internal security measures with the stated goal of identifying terrorist activities as well as the potential for terrorism. As the scope of the Patriot Act became clear, so too did its impact on the Arab-American community (194)

It may be said that the bitter, post-9/11 experiences of the Arab-Americans have been simply a continuation and intensification of the larger, decades-long patterns of prejudice and discrimination directed against them. Hainsworth observes: “For many Arab-Americans, however, September 11, 2001, meant not only an awareness of a new phase of our national life, but a loss of personal safety as well”. *Once in a Promised Land*, written in such a social climate, can not but be true to the facts of America’s post-9/11 socio-political history.

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