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Arab American Identity and Resistance: A Counter-Narrative to Islamophobia in Leila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*

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Abstract**—** *Leila Halaby's Once in a Promised Land serves as a powerful counter-narrative to post-9/11 Islamophobic discourses. The novel critically explores the racial profiling, state surveillance, and societal prejudices that Arab Americans faced in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Through the experiences of Salwa and Jassim, the narrative dismantles stereotypes surrounding Islam and Arab identities, while interrogating the American Dream. Halaby also challenges Orientalist perspectives on Muslim oppression and highlights the intersectionality of race and gender in Islamophobic violence, offering a nuanced critique of post-9/11 societal and political practices.*

Keywords**— Post-9/11 literature, Islamophobia, Arab American identity, Racial profiling, Counter-narrative**

The post-9/11 literary landscape in English witnessed a surge of novels and short stories addressing themes of Islam and Muslims. These works reflect intellectual and media responses to the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, which fostered widespread Islamophobia. Dominant narratives often portrayed Muslims and Islam as existential threats, reinforcing stereotypes and fueling racial and religious biases. Against this backdrop, works such as Leila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) emerge as counter-narratives, challenging these dominant discourses and offering nuanced perspectives on Arab and Muslim identities in post-9/11 America.

This article examines Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* as a representative text of Arab American literature, countering the vilification of Islam and the racialization of Arab Americans that characterized much of the Anglo-American post-9/11 literary production. Through its exploration of racial profiling, state surveillance, and the struggles of assimilation, the novel critiques the reductive binaries of "with us or against us" that permeated American political and cultural discourse.

The Hypervisibility of Arab Americans Post-9/11

Before 9/11, Arab Americans were often perceived as an "invisible" racial and ethnic group in the United States. However, as Nadine Naber observes, the attacks rendered Arab Americans "glaringly conspicuous," subjecting them to racial violence and suspicion. Steven Salaita underscores this shift, noting that the war on terror transformed Arab Americans from "invisible" to "hypervisible." Despite this newfound visibility, mainstream media focused predominantly on individual hate crimes, often downplaying the systemic injustices perpetuated by state mechanisms such as the Patriot Act, FBI investigations, and special registration programs.

Halaby's novel articulates these issues, portraying the lived experiences of Salwa and Jassim, a Jordanian-Palestinian couple navigating the aftermath of 9/11. Through their struggles, the text reveals how Arab Americans became scapegoats, targeted by both societal prejudices and institutionalized discrimination.

Contesting Stereotypes and Racial Profiling

One of Halaby's central critiques is the racialization and scapegoating of Arab Americans, particularly through state-sponsored initiatives like mass arrests, indefinite detentions, and surveillance. As Louise Cainkar documents in *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11*, these measures often involved secret evidence, attorney-client eavesdropping, and mandatory special registration. Halaby depicts how these mechanisms reinforce Islamophobic narratives, forcing Muslims to constantly dissociate themselves from terrorism to assert their innocence. The State sponsored religious profiling was carried out through the introduction of security like the introduction of Patriot Act and FBI investigations which Louise Cainkar documents in her comprehensive sociological study *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11*.

These security initiatives included mass arrests, secret and indefinite detentions,

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> prolonged detention of 'material witnesses,' closed hearings and the use of secret evidence, government eavesdropping on attorney-client conversations, FBI home and work visits, wiretapping, seizures of property, removals of aliens with technical visa violations, freezing the assets of charities, and mandatory special registration(119).

In this connection, Carol N. Fadda-Conrey points out that "The period following September 2001did not only generate a need on the part of Arab Americans and Muslim-Americans to deflect the terrorism and fanaticism charges targeting them but has made it important for Arab-American poets, fiction writers, journalists, and essayists to point out the historical injustices that fellow Arabs in the Middle East had been subjected to by US foreign policy" (59).Pointing to this situation, Halaby, at the very outset of the novel says,"Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Centre. Nothing and everything" (Halaby 1).This apologetic and conformist stand in the beginning of the novel suggests the precarious racial identity that Muslims occupied in America. The anti-Arab backlash triggered by September 11 attacks, Salaita states, ''attempted to urge Arab Americans, before 9/11 generally anti-assimilationist and radical, into total assimilation'' (78)

The Disintegration of the American Dream

Salwa and Jassim initially embody the ideal of the American Dream, enjoying material success and professional fulfillment. However, their aspirations unravel under the weight of racial discrimination and societal alienation. Salwa, a bank teller and real estate broker, faces blatant hostility from clients. In one instance, an American customer accuses her of being a potential terrorist, equating her Palestinian identity with theft and violence. This incident exemplifies the pervasive suspicion directed at Arab Americans.

Jassim, a hydrologist committed to his mission of ensuring water accessibility, is similarly targeted. Despite his professional achievements, he becomes the subject of FBI scrutiny due to baseless accusations by colleagues driven by post-9/11 xenophobia. Halaby portrays these experiences as emblematic of the broader racial prejudice ingrained in American society, where Arab Americans are often reduced to their racial and religious identities.

Gendered Violence and Misogynistic Stereotypes

The novel also critiques the gendered dimensions of Islamophobic narratives. Salwa's experiences reveal how Muslim women are subject to both racial and gendered violence. Her extramarital relationship with Jake, an American man, initially offers solace but devolves into assault and racial abuse. Though the first instance of her sexual relation with him was of a mutual attraction, the second one was a case of assault which she could not resist. Besides, the response from Jake when she goes to speak to him about her plan of departure from America is even more atrocious.

> Why did you come here? You came because you want sex. That's why. That's what all of this has been about…No, Jake. I am saying goodbye…"When do you leave?" "Monday."…"So you're running back to the pigsty?" Salwa's brain skipped. "Pardon?" "I said you're running back to the pigsty you came from."…She saw that he was holding something rectangular that caught the sun. A part of her brain processed that he was giving her a gift, a picture, and that for some reason he was lifting it into the air. In one powerful blink, it came down on her cheek, just below her eye, and she felt as if her face had been sliced with something that was part sledgehammer, part knife. She screamed and bent her head forward, covered her face, caught her blood…Another blow, aimed at the back of her head…"Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch."(321)

Additionally, Halaby destabilizes Orientalist stereotypes that depict Islam as inherently oppressive to women. Through characters like Salwa and Penny, the novel interrogates these assumptions, highlighting the hypocrisy of Western critiques of gender inequality in the Muslim world. For instance, Penny's statement that "Men over there can marry four women at once, make them wear those sheets over their whole bodies" reflects the Orientalist gaze that conflates cultural practices with religious doctrine.

Surveillance and the "Petty Sovereigns" of Islamophobia

Halaby critiques the role of ordinary citizens in perpetuating Islamophobia, drawing on Georgiana Banita's concept of "moral racialization." Banita argues that the Bush administration's dichotomy of "good and evil" during the war on terror transformed Arab Americans into "racially suspicious enemy figures," encouraging citizens to act as "eyes and ears of the government." This phenomenon is evident in *Once in a Promised Land*, where Salwa and Jassim are subjected to informal surveillance by coworkers and strangers alike.

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Jassim's interactions at his workplace reveal how Islamophobic suspicion infiltrates even mundane settings. His colleagues, driven by personal grievances and state rhetoric, report him to the FBI without evidence. Similarly, Salwa's confrontation with a mall employee who suspects Jassim of suspicious behavior highlights the absurdity of these prejudices. Similar to what happened to Salwa, Jassim, a committed hydrologist working hard for the country encounters racial discrimination. Jassim is also reported to the FBI by the receptionists of the company he is working with simply for hatred for Arabs. Halaby says, "…after September 11, Bella and Lisa were both really angry. They wanted to get revenge and they wanted to be involved in that revenge."(271). In another occasion when the emotional estrangement of Jassim from Salwa takes him to Penny, a waitress in a cafe, she also appears to carry certain racial prejudices on Muslims. She does not openly suspect Jassim involving in any terrorist activities, though. This gets revealed in Penny's reply to Trini when she is asked about her relation with Jasssim.

> I don't get you, Penny. How can you like that guy and then you want to blow up his whole country…Jassim is a good guy-he's not like them, shouldn't be judged like them. But those people over there, they oppress women and kill each other. They're the ones who should be bombed…Men over there can marry four women at once, make them wear those sheets over their whole bodies.(281)

Halaby critiques these instances as manifestations of systemic Islamophobia, perpetuated by both institutional policies and individual biases.

Resisting the Orientalist Gaze

Halaby's novel also challenges the Orientalist narratives that position Arab and Muslim identities as "Other." Characters like Jack Franks, who expresses disdain for his daughter's conversion to Islam, and Penny, who perpetuates stereotypes about misogyny in the Arab world, embody the prejudices that the novel seeks to dismantle. By presenting multifaceted Arab American characters, Halaby destabilizes these reductive representations, offering a nuanced portrayal of their identities.

The intensity of this racial prejudice is revealed to Jassim when his car hits a boy whom Jassim finds intentionally turning his skateboard into his car as "he then pushed off and jumped, propelling himself straight into the front of Jassim's car. Jassim swerved left, felt a sickening thunk, and watched as the boy flipped over the hood"(117).In the days of severe grief and guilt followed, his meeting the parents of the boy makes him shockingly aware of the extensive scale of racial prejudice deeply ingrained even in the minds of common men in America. Mrs. Parker, the bereaved mother, reveals that her son was an uncompromising hater of the Arabs. She tells,

> 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),

One pervasive stereotype in the mainstream narratives that the novel attempts to destabilise is that Americans that Muslims are uncivilized and Islam is women oppressive .There are several occasions in the novel where the characters often reveal their prejudices on the East in general and Islam and Muslims in particular. For instance, in the very beginning of the novel, When Jack Franks meets Jassim at the fitness centre, he appears a bit sceptical about him due to his appearance. After realising that he is from Jordan, he says, "I went to Jordan once … followed my daughter there. She married a Jordanian. Not one like you, though. This one was from the sticks—or the sand, as the case was … [s]he's converted. She's an Arab now" (6).His displeasure is intensified because his daughter ran away with a man from Jordan and converted to Islam as well. Aside from that, the Orientalist prejudice about Islam as misogynist gets revealed when Penny speaks about Jassim to her friend .She says that Jassim is a good guy, "but those people over there, they oppress women and kill each other. They're the ones who should be bombed" (281). This prejudice of Penny, in fact, stems from the cultural context wherein slam is stereotyped as an essentially oppressive ideology wherein women do not enjoy freedom.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, *Once in a Promised Land* stands as a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant post-9/11 literary canon. Through its exploration of racial profiling, gendered violence, and Orientalist stereotypes, the novel critiques the Islamophobic discourses that proliferated in the wake of 9/11. Halaby's nuanced portrayal of Salwa and Jassim's experiences challenges the homogenization of Muslim identities and exposes the hypocrisies of American societal and state practices. In doing so, the novel asserts the

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importance of resisting monolithic representations and advocating for a more inclusive understanding of Arab and Muslim identities in contemporary literature.

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